160 Pages

LOVE STORIES OF THE REAL WEST

RANCH ROMANCES

Second March Number

20¢

Queen of Saddle Valley

A Novel of Western Courage

By ROBERT DALE DENVER

Second March, 1935 ♦ RANCH ROMANCES ♦ 20 cents

SORE THROAT

SEE HOW QUICKLY LISTERINE RELIEVES IT

Don't put up with the pain of ordinary sore throat. It is so unnecessary At the first symptom of trouble, gargle with Listerine just as it comes from the bottle. You'll be delighted by the result.

Often one gargle is enough to relieve that tight, raw, burning feeling. If relief is not immediate, repeat the gargle at 2 hour intervals. Usually two or three applications of Listerine are sufficient.

Listerine gets results because it is first of all a powerful, though safe, antiseptic which attacks millions of germs on mouth and throat surfaces. Tests have shown that when used as a gargle, Listerine reaches far beyond the soft palate into the posterior pharynx where sore throat frequently starts.

Keep Listerine handy in home and office and use it full strength at the first symptom of a cold or sore throat. Lambert Pharmacal Co., St. Louis, Missouri.

METROPOLITAN GRAND OPERA
Every Saturday . . . 82 NBC Stations

PLEASANT TO TASTE · SAFE TO USE

BIG PAY JOBS *in* ELECTRICITY

12 WEEKS TRAINING AT COYNE WILL QUALIFY YOU

Fit yourself for a permanent job, with good pay and a real future. Better times are opening wide the door to a brilliant new Electrical Age offering the greatest opportunities in history for electrically-trained men. 12 weeks training in the Great Coyne Shops will qualify you. My practical shop methods make it **amazingly easy to learn** — no books, no correspondence, but real electrical work on real electrical machinery!

STUDENTS BUSY AT WORK IN GREAT COYNE SHOPS

H. C. Lewis

I'll Finance Your Training

There are absolutely no conditions attached to this offer. I MEAN EXACTLY WHAT I SAY.... You get the full and complete training of the world's oldest and largest Practical Electrical School — AND YOU DON'T START PAYING YOUR TUITION UNTIL TWO MONTHS AFTER YOU GRADUATE! How can I do it? Because the type of fellow who is ambitious enough to make a little effort to get ahead, is honest. IF YOU ARE AMBITIOUS ENOUGH TO SEND IN THE COUPON TO THIS AD and then SPEND JUST THREE MONTHS in LEARNING ELECTRICITY, I'LL TRUST YOU for the TUITION until 2 months AFTER the Training Period and then give you OVER A YEAR TO COMPLETE THE SMALL MONTHLY PAYMENTS.

AMAZINGLY EASY WAY TO LEARN

Lack of experience—age or advanced education bars no one. I don't care if you don't know an armature from an air brake—I don't expect you to! It makes no difference! Don't let lack of money stop you. Most of the men at Coyne have no more money than you have. That's why I have worked out my offers.

MANY EARN While LEARNING

If you need part-time work to help pay your living expenses and will tell me your problems I may be able to help you as I have thousands of others. Then, in 12 brief weeks, in the great roaring shops of Coyne, I train you as you never dreamed you could be trained . . . on one of the greatest outlays of electrical apparatus ever assembled . . . real dynamos, engines, power plants, auto, switchboards, transmitting stations . . . everything from doorbells to farm power and lighting . . . full-sized . . . in full operation every day!

Prepare for Jobs Like These

Here are a few of hundreds of positions in the electrical field. Our free employment bureau gives you a lifetime employment service.

ARMATURE EXPERT
SUBSTATION OPERATOR
AUTO ELECTRICIAN
INVENTOR
MAINTENANCE ENGINEER
SERVICE STATION OWNER
RADIO EXPERT

TRAINING By Actual Work

No dull books, no baffling charts, no classes, you get individual training . . . all real actual work with only the theory you will need. Building real batteries . . . winding real armatures, operating real motors, dynamos and generators, wiring houses, etc. That's a glimpse of how we help to make you a master electrician, and fit you to qualify for jobs leading to the biggest pay.

Jobs-Pay-Future

"Two weeks after graduation I received a splendid job. The main consideration given my application was that I was a Coyne Trained man," reported Harold Soucy of Illinois. "I wish to thank your Employment Manager for securing this position for me," wrote Albert Yagon, "he sent me out to this Company the first day and I was employed there immediately." And I could go on quoting from hundreds of letters of successful Coyne Trained Men. What they have done, you should be able to do!

Electric Refrigeration

Right now I'm including my big new Electric Refrigeration course at no extra cost.

GET THE FACTS

Coyne is your one greatest chance to get into electricity. Every obstacle is removed. This school is 36 years old—Coyne training is tested—proven beyond all doubt—endorsed by many large electrical concerns. You can find out everything absolutely free. Simply mail the coupon and let me send you the big, free Coyne book of 150 photographs . . . facts . . . jobs . . . salaries . . . opportunities. Tells you how many earn expenses while training and how we assist our graduates in the field. This does not obligate you. So act at once. Just mail coupon.

Get This FREE Book

Now In Our New Home

This is our new fireproof modern home wherein is installed thousands of dollars' worth of Electrical equipment of all kinds. Every comfort and convenience has been arranged to make you happy and contented during your training.

H. C. LEWIS, President
Coyne Electrical School, Dept. 35-66
500 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.

Dear Mr. Lewis:—Without obligation send me your big free catalog and all details of Free Employment Service and your new Electric Refrigeration course, also tell me all about your "Pay After Graduation Offer."

Name.....

Address.....

City..... *State*.....

COYNE H. C. LEWIS, PRESIDENT **ELECTRICAL SCHOOL** FOUNDED 1899
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 35-66, Chicago

On Sale Every Other Friday

Vol. LIX

RANCH ROMANCES

No. 4

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

SECOND MARCH NUMBER

QUEEN OF SADDLE VALLEY.....Robert Dale Denver 491
A Complete Novel

PAY OFF.....Sally Lockhart 551

CROW'S NEST.....Cliff Walters 563

DEVIL'S DISCIPLES.....Herbert A. Woodbury 572
A Romantic Serial—Part One

DOUBLE FRAME-UP.....Eric Howard 597

A CHORE FOR HAPPY.....R. Craig Christensen 607

BUCKAROO CLAN.....Clee Woods 616
A Tale of Tangled Hearts and Guns—Conclusion

THE STORY OF K. P. .....Jack Potter 626
An Old-Timer's Recollections

TRAIL'S END ROLL CALL..... 631
The Club Page

OUT OF THE CHUTES.....Tex Sherman 632
The Rodeo Department

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE 634
A Try-Your-Skill Department

OUR AIR MAIL.....The Readers 636
A Speak-Your-Mind Department

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?.....Professor Marcus Mari 638
The Horoscope Department

In the First April Number

DESERT WATERS

A NOVEL OF ROMANCE AND DANGER

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Single Copies, 20 Cents — Yearly Subscription, $4.00 (In Canada, $4.50)

Issued bi-weekly by WARNER PUBLICATIONS, INC., 578 Madison Ave., New York

ELTINGE F. WARNER, President — P. C. CODY, Vice-President — ELMER J. CHAMBERS, Treasurer — FANNY ELLSWORTH, Secretary

This Issue Dated March 22, 1935

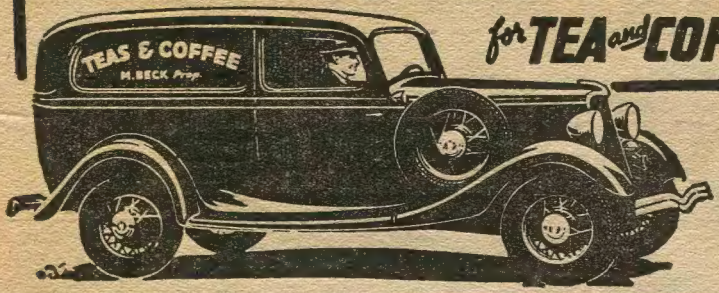
Entered as second-class matter on October 10, 1924, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered as a Trade-mark in the U. S. Patent Office.

Copyright, 1935, by Warner Publications, Inc.

For advertising rates address The Newsstand Fiction Unit, 420 Lexington Avenue, New York; or 180 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago

MEN WANTED

for TEA and COFFEE ROUTES



Calling On 200 Families Pays UP TO $60.00 A WEEK

IF you are willing to follow my simple, plain instructions you are eligible to handle one of these fine-paying routes. My sensational new starting plan produces splendid earnings for you at once. No long wait or delay to get the money you need now. Think of starting in right away and quickly making up to $60.00 a week full time, and up to $6.50 a day spare time—in your own locality. The work is pleasant, the hours are short, and the earning possibilities are exceptionally large.

Special Openings for Women

I have some unusually good openings for women. Light, pleasant occupation pays up to $9.50 a day full time and as high as $6 a day spare time. Mrs. Carrie McCalmant, Neb., reported that she never permitted her earnings to run below $50.00 a week. Mrs. Jewel Hackett, here in Ohio, made $33.00 in 7 hours. Earnings such as these are evidence of the tremendous possibilities of my offer to women.

Started Penniless—6½ Months Later Was Worth $1,200.00

"Only 6½ months ago I started with your company without a penny to my name, and today (I just finished my balance) I am worth a little more than $1,200.00. I can hardly believe it possible—such success in so short a time.—Hans Coordes, Neb."

MADE $79.00 IN ONE WEEK

"I certainly thank you for the wonderful opportunity you have given me and for the many extra favors. I made as high as $23.00 in a single day and as much as $79.00 in a week.
—Lambert Wilson, Mich."

PERMANENT ROUTE PAYS BIG WEEKLY CASH INCOME

Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Extracts, Baking Powder and similar household supplies. You simply take care of a regular route in your locality, making calls on your customers once a week and keeping them supplied with the things they need. You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. I'll furnish you with hundreds of fine premiums and amazing special bargains to offer your customers.

QUICK CASH FOR YOU

My amazing new Tea and Coffee Route Plans provide for your having immediate earnings. If you are willing and able to give prompt service to your steady customers on one of these Routes, you are just the person I am looking for. You will start in your own locality, right near where you live. My startling new plan means immediate succes — places business in your hands the first day. There is nothing difficult about the work—no red tape in getting started. You won't have to rent a store, buy fixtures or other expensive equipment. I'll start you on a positively No-Risk Trial. You have everything to gain—nothing to lose.

VACANCIES BEING FILLED RAPIDLY

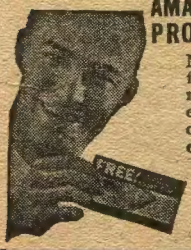
Others are making big money with my plans—why not you? Here's what some have already done: Howard B. Ziegler, Pa., made as much as $21.60 in a single day and $103.32 in a single week. Albert Becker, Mich., made $40.00 in a day and as high as $100.00 in a week. Ray Chapman, Mo., made $73.50 in a week. Chester Clay, N. Mex., made $10 in just two hours. These exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of my offer.

I FURNISH EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details of the inside workings of this nation-wide Tea and Coffee Route Plan that is taking the country by storm. I will explain just how you go about servicing a route. The plans I give you cost me thousands upon thousands of dollars. They are time-tried and proved. They have brought quick money relief to hundreds and thousands. Why not you!

FREE WITHOUT OBLIGATION

Don't send me a cent. Just rush me your name so I can lay all the facts before you and then you can decide for yourself. My plans are complete. I send you—absolutely free—the details of my offer. Send name on coupon or penny postcard. Costs nothing. Do it—NOW!



AMAZING GIFT COUPON PLAN STARTS PROFITS ROLLING IN AT ONCE

No long wait or delay. I give you a flying start. You step into the big money-making class over night. No experience is needed—nothing difficult or complicated to memorize—no examinations to take. Just offer valuable gift coupons; everyone will want to get their share of these wonderful gifts. Rush me your name and I'll tell you all of the startling details by return mail.

ALBERT MILLS, Rte. Mgr.
7453 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.
Without cost or obligation on my part, send me free the facts about your sensational new Gift Coupon Plan, showing how I can get started at once making up to $60.00 a week.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

Most Amazing
TYPEWRITER BARGAIN

10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

FREE HOME TYPING COURSE

NEW REMINGTON PORTABLE only 10c A DAY

FIRST TIME! Remington's new purchase plan now lets you buy a genuine latest model Remington Portable No. 5 direct from the factory for only 10c a day. Not used or rebuilt. Not incomplete. A beautiful brand new regulation Remington Portable. Standard 4-row keyboard, standard width carriage, margin release on keyboard, back spacer, automatic ribbon reverse; every essential feature found in standard typewriters. With your machine we send you *free* a 19-page course in typewriting. Teaches touch system quickly, easily. Soon you dash off letters quicker than with pen and ink. You also get a handsome, sturdy carrying case free.

10-DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

FREE Typing Course Carrying Case

The amazing low price and easy terms now make it possible for you to buy this genuine complete Remington Portable for only 10c a day. But we cannot guarantee present prices long. Higher wage scales, rising cost of materials, everything points to higher prices. So we say, "Act now . . . while our liberal offer still holds good!"

You Don't Risk One Cent

Try this typewriter in your home or office on our 10-day FREE TRIAL OFFER. Then, if you do not agree that it is the finest portable *at any price,* return it at our expense. *You don't even risk shipping charges.* Don't wait. Mail coupon now. It's the best chance you've ever had to own so complete a machine for so little money. So act NOW!

CLIP COUPON NOW

Remington Rand Inc., Dept. 147-3
Buffalo, N. Y.

Please tell me how I can buy a new Remington Portable typewriter for only 10c a day. Also enclose your new catalog.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ *State* _____

So Easy to Play

What a thrill— I love a Sax'

. . . and I've had it only a week

● Popularity! Step right into it with a P-A Sax'. No failures. Learn quickly. Play tunes first week. Join a dance band in 90 days. Only P-A assures such rapid progress. Easiest blowing, fingering; most beautiful tone. See your P-A Dealer, or write direct. No obligation. Easy terms. Write today. 1100

PAN-AMERICAN

349 P-A Building, Elkhart, Indiana

Moderate Price

Like Taking LIGHTED *Cigarettes from Your Pocket*

MAGIC CASE AMAZES EVERYBODY

Gaze in wonder while I show you a new way to smoke. LOOK! I take a beautifully enameled case from my vest pocket. I touch a magic button! There is a Spark . . . a Flame. Just one motion . . . the pressure of one finger delivers a LIGHTED cigarette to my lips. I PUFF and SMOKE! No matches or separate lighters necessary.

Agents Get facts that fairly scream big profits.

15-DAY TRIAL OFFER

Get a Magic Case on 15 days' trial at our risk. Get amazing facts how this great invention can make you big money without selling.

Magic Case Mfrs., Dept. C-659
4234 Cozens Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

BECOME AN EXPERT

ACCOUNTANT

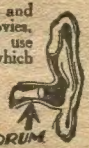
Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $3,000 to $15,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. Only 12,000 Certified Public Accountants in the U. S. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C.P.A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C.P.A.'s, including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays."

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 375-H, Chicago

The School That Has Trained Over 1,200 C. P. A.'s

DEAFNESS IS MISERY

Many people with defective hearing and Head Noises enjoy Conversation, Movies, Church and Radio, because they use Leonard Invisible Ear Drums which resemble Tiny Megaphones fitting in the Ear entirely out of sight. No wires, batteries or head piece. They are inexpensive. Write for booklet and sworn statement of the inventor who was himself deaf.



DRUM

A. O. LEONARD, Inc., Suite 23, 70 5th Ave., New York

GOV'T. JOBS

SALARY TO START $105 to $175 MONTHLY

MEN... WOMEN Age Range 18 to 50

- ( ) Ry. Mail Clerk
- ( ) P. O. Laborer
- ( ) R. F. D. Carrier
- ( ) Special Agent
- ( ) Customs Inspector
- ( ) City Mail Carrier
- ( ) P. O. Clerk
- ( ) Matron
- ( ) Immig't Inspector
- ( ) Typist
- ( ) POSTMASTER
- ( ) Seamstress
- ( ) Auditor
- ( ) Stenographer
- ( ) U.S. Border Patrol
- ( ) Telephone Opr.
- ( ) Watchman
- ( ) Meat Inspectors
- ( ) Statistical Clerk
- ( ) File Clerk

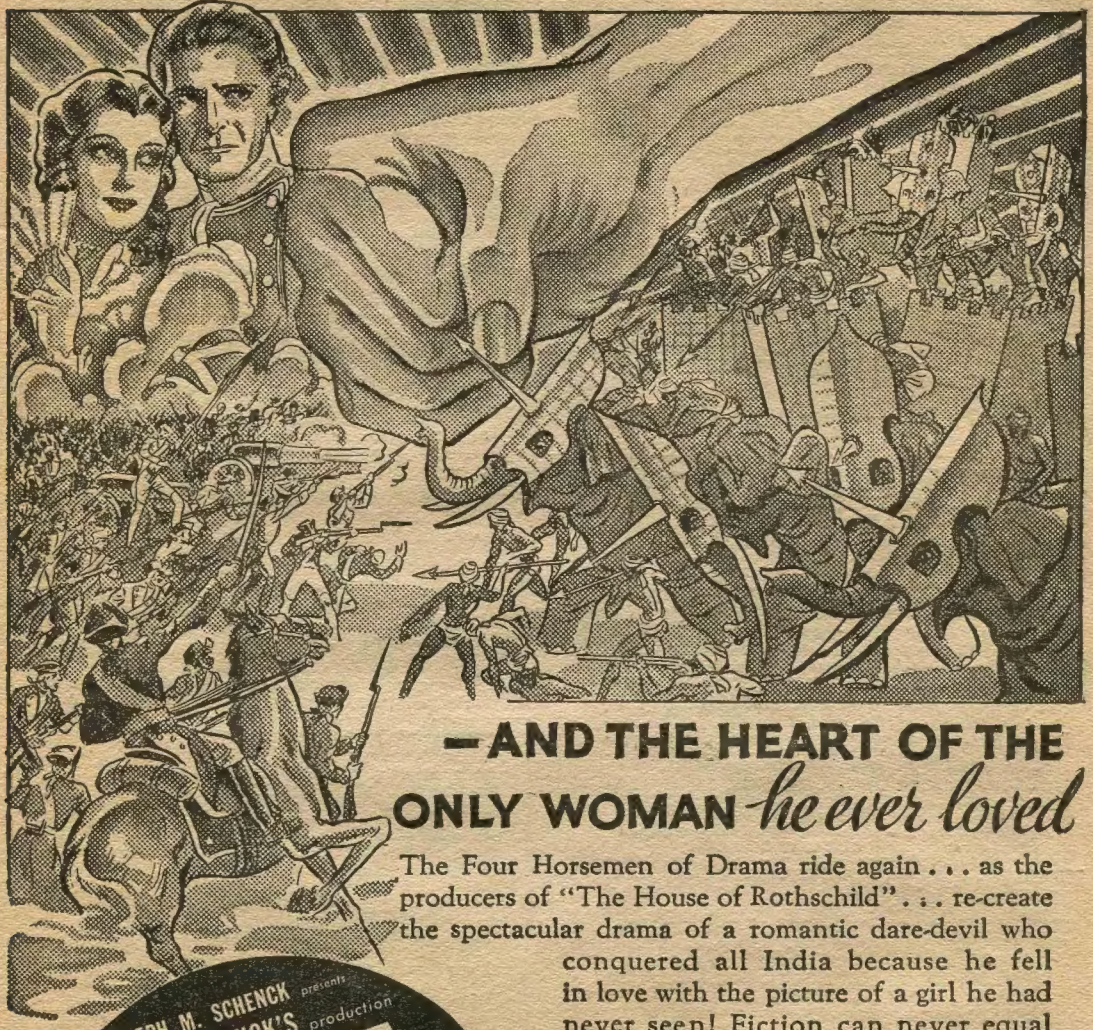
INSTRUCTION BUREAU, Dept. 112, St. Louis, Mo.

Send me FREE particulars "How to Qualify for Government Positions" marked "X". Salaries, locations, opportunities, etc. ALL SENT FREE.

Name.....

Address.....

HIS IRON FIST SMASHED INDIA!



—AND THE HEART OF THE ONLY WOMAN *he ever loved*

The Four Horsemen of Drama ride again . . . as the producers of "The House of Rothschild" . . . re-create the spectacular drama of a romantic dare-devil who conquered all India because he fell in love with the picture of a girl he had never seen! Fiction can never equal the exploits of this Man of Destiny!

SEE! SEE!

Clive lead his "mad" army to avenge the massacre of the Black Hole of Calcutta in which 146 gallant British lost their lives. First time on the motion picture screen!

An Indian Potentate's human chessboard . . . with beauties as pawns, and with death to the losers!

Hundreds of infuriated, armored battle elephants . . . the strangest warriors in history, in the mighty conflict at Plassey!

The trial of Clive before the English House of Parliament when the conqueror of all India is charged with treason.

The duel which convinces Clive that he is a man of destiny . . . a man who cannot die!

A charging army of knife-wielding warriors cross swollen rivers in the teeth of a wild monsoon!

Clive lead an army of hundreds to victory against 60,000 troops of the Maharajah . . . when six words from a woman changed the destiny of all Asia!

JOSEPH M. SCHENCK presents
DARRYL F. ZANUCK'S production

CLIVE of INDIA

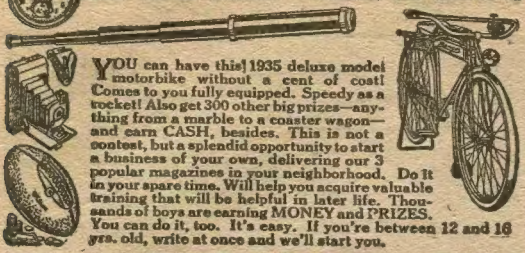
Starring
RONALD COLMAN
LORETTA YOUNG

Directed by
RICHARD BOLESLAWSKI

Released thru UNITED ARTISTS

20th Century Picture

BIKE GIVEN



YOU can have this 1935 deluxe model motorbike without a cent of cost! Comes to you fully equipped. Speedy as a rocket! Also get 300 other big prizes—anything from a marble to a coaster wagon—and earn CASH, besides. This is not a contest, but a splendid opportunity to start a business of your own, delivering our 3 popular magazines in your neighborhood. Do it in your spare time. Will help you acquire valuable training that will be helpful in later life. Thousands of boys are earning MONEY and PRIZES. You can do it, too. It's easy. If you're between 12 and 16 yrs. old, write at once and we'll start you.

Jim Thayer, Dept. 461. The Crowell Publishing Co., Springfield, Ohio

INVENTORS

Time counts in applying for patents. Don't risk delay in protecting your ideas. Send sketch or model for instructions or write for new FREE book, "Patent Guide for the Inventor," and "Record of Invention" form. No charge for information on how to proceed. Communications strictly confidential. Prompt, careful, efficient service. **CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN, Registered Patent Attorney, 187-Z Adams Building, Washington, D. C.**

REAL JOBS OPEN

For Trained Auto Mechanics

Step into Big Pay. Earn $35 to $75 a week. I train you in only 8 weeks at largest schools of kind in world. New practical shop plan. Learn with real tools . . . on real equipment. Write today for Big Free Opportunity Book and Special Low Tuition Offer. Address school nearest you.

FREE BOOK

McSWEENY SCHOOLS, Dept. 22-15 Cleveland, O. or Kansas City, Mo.

NO JOKE TO BE DEAF

—Every deaf person knows that—

Mr. Way made himself hear his watch tick after being deaf for twenty-five years, with his Artificial Ear Drums. He wore them day and night. They stopped his head noises. They are invisible and comfortable, no wires or batteries. Write for TRUE STORY. Also booklet on Deafness.

Artificial Ear Drum

THE WAY COMPANY
737 Hofmann Bldg. Detroit, Michigan

WE MATCH PANTS

NRA MEMBER WE DO OUR PART

To Any Suit!

Double the life of your coat and vest with correctly matched pants. 100,000 patterns. Every pair hand tailored to your measure. Our match sent FREE for your O. K. before pants are made. Fit guaranteed. **Send piece of cloth or vest today.**

SUPERIOR MATCH PANTS COMPANY
209 South State St. Dept. 283 Chicago

BIG MONEY SELLING SHIRTS

AGENTS WANTED to represent old-established firm and take orders. Make Big Money every day selling Dress Shirts, Work Shirts, Neckwear, Underwear, Dresses, Hosiery, Swim Suits, Smocks, Pajamas, Sweaters, Polo Shirts, Pants, Play Suits, Overalls, Coveralls, Raincoats, Men's Suits, Uniforms. Everything Guaranteed. Experience unnecessary.

BIG OUTFIT FREE! Write quick.
NIMROD CO., Dept. 75, 4922-28 Lincoln Ave. Chicago, Ill.

MAKE MONEY with Your CAMERA

134,000 photos SOLD EVERY WEEK by people who know how to take the kind of pictures wanted by newspapers, magazines, advertisers. We teach you, at low cost, how to take real human-interest pictures that SELL. Learning by our method, in spare time, is fascinating, easy! Our marketing service helps you to quick, nation-wide sales. Write now for **FREE BOOK** that tells you how to earn while you learn.

UNIVERSAL PHOTOGRAPHERS, Dept. 703, 10 W. 33rd St., N.Y.C.

TOBACCO HABIT BANISHED

FOR THOUSANDS OF MEN
QUICK, SURE, LASTING RESULTS

in most cases **Tobacco Redeemer** relieves craving for tobacco completely in a very few days. An absolutely safe, dependable, and thoroughly reliable treatment. No matter how long the habit, or in what form used, all craving for tobacco usually vanishes when this pleasant, inexpensive treatment is used according to simple directions. The treatment has helped thousands and should help you. Your money returned without argument or question if not satisfied. Write for free explanatory booklet and proof of what **Tobacco Redeemer** has done for men addicted to the tobacco habit. Send post card or letter today.

NEWELL PHARMACAL CO.
Dept. 600 Clayton Station St. Louis, Mo.

LINCOLN AND INDIAN HEAD

PENNIES WANTED

WE PAY UP TO $2 EACH IF MORE THAN 11 YEARS OLD

and up to $500 for certain U. S. Cents
Send 10c. today for 16 page fully illustrated catalog.

NATIONAL COIN CO.
Box 731NF MILWAUKEE, WIS.

ΙΞΔ Join IOTA XI DELTA

An organization of hobby and pen pals . . . 5000 members, both sexes, in U. S. and 17 foreign countries. . . . Membership includes unique illustrated monthly magazine, letters published for members, miscellaneous contributions, poetry, jokes, personal items, etc. . . . Attractive fraternity membership pin . . . dues moderate. Write today for details. Sample copy I X D magazine 10¢ coin or stamps.

RICHARD MURDOC, c/o IOTA XI DELTA, Suite 320, 416 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill., U. S. A.

SHOOTING— FISHING— CAMPING—

Guns and ammunition, fishing tackle of every kind, tents, canoes, etc.—

What do you want to know about them? Whatever it is, you will get it by regularly reading the largest and finest of all magazines of its kind—

Field & Stream

In every issue pages of articles and stories about many kinds of hunting and fishing and camping, and nine departments devoted to practical where-when-and-how-to-do-it dope on firearms, fishing tackle, camping, dogs, small boats, natural history, skeet, etc. Free information service given by the authorities editing these departments.

Get a copy today, any newsdealer, and see for yourself.

TYPEWRITER ½ Price

Easy Terms
Only 10c a Day

Save over ½ on all standard office models. Also portables at reduced prices.

SEND NO MONEY

All late models completely refinished like brand new. **FULLY GUARANTEED.** Big free catalog shows actual machines in full colors. Lowest prices. Send at once.

Free course in typing included.

10-day Trial

International Typewriter Exch., 231 W. Monroe St. Dept. 392, Chicago

ARMY-NAVY Bargains

Haversacks	$ .75	Cart. belt	$ .60
Machete-bolo	$1.50	Flint pistol	$6.95
Army saddle	$9.85	M/L shot gun	$4.85

Springfield cal. 30/06 rifle, 24" barrel now $16.50

1933 catalog, with 1935 supplement, 364 pages of pistols, armor, guns, daggers, etc., mailed for 50 cents. New circular for 3c stamp.

Established 1865

FRANCIS BANNERMAN SONS, 501 Broadway, New York City

BE TALL

Your Height Increased in 14 days or money back! The amazing Stebbing System soon brings 3-5 inches increase, new "pep" and energy. A valuable Health Course and "Success and Popularity" Course included FREE with System, sent complete for $2.00, or send 3¢ for convincing Free Book with testimonials and Guarantee in plain sealed envelope. WRITE NOW TO:—

STEBBING SYSTEM

Dept. F G. 16, FOREST HILLS, NEW YORK

Free • TRIAL LESSON in DRAFTING

If over 17 years of age send for this Free Trial Lesson in Drafting. Interesting and instructive. Shows how easy to *learn at home* by C. T. C. Method. We furnish all tools. Get ready now for money-making opportunities opening for trained Draftsmen. Write today.

CHICAGO TECH COLLEGE
C281 Tech Bldg., 118 E. 26th St., Chicago, Ill.

PATENTS

HAVE YOU AN IDEA ?

● Other men have read and profited by our free book, "PATENT PROTECTION." Fully explains many interesting points to inventors and illustrates important mechanical principles. With book we also send free "Evidence of Invention" form. Prompt service, reasonable fees, deferred payments, thirty-six years' experience. Avoid risk of delay. Write immediately to:

Victor J. Evans & Co., Registered Patented Attorneys, 519-C, Victor Building, Washington, D C.

LAW

STUDY AT HOME

Legally trained men win high positions and big success in business and public life. Be independent. Greater opportunities now than ever before. Big corporations are headed by men with legal training. Earn

$3,000 to $10,000 Annually

We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL. B. conferred. Successful graduates in every section of the United States. We furnish all text material, including fourteen-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 64-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send for them NOW.

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 375-L, Chicago

BE A RAILWAY TRAFFIC INSPECTOR

A Good Position Will Be Ready for You

UPON COMPLETION of our short, home-study course, we will place you as a *Railway and Bus Passenger Traffic Inspector*, at up to $140 per month, plus expenses, to start, or *refund tuition*. Advancement is rapid with experienced men earning more. Active Men—19 to 50—eligible. Healthful, fascinating work. Free Booklet describes our 16-year experience. **STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INSTITUTE, Div. 1303, Buffalo, N. Y.**

"I'M GLAD I LEARNED DRAFTING AT HOME BY MAIL. I PREPARED IN TIME"

A Good Job Soon!

For MORE PAY Learn DRAFTING FROM AN ENGINEER

GET READY for Prosperity. Aviation, automobiling, electricity, machinery, building lines and other industries are now calling for draftsmen. Many new draftsmen will soon be needed. Be ready for Big Pay. Engineer Dobe will train you at your home by mail until you get that good job or will prepare you for better pay on the job you have. That's my written guarantee to you. All tools and drawing table sent at once if you enroll now. (*Est. 1900*).

FREE BOOK

"Success in Draftsmanship"

This book explains "My Pay-Raising Plan". It tells you how I help you find a real opportunity in any-one of many big industries. NOW is the time to *prepare* for that job. *TODAY*—is the time to write for this free book! (No obligations).

ENGINEER DOBE, Div. 30-33 LIBERTYVILLE, ILL.

GET A Government JOB

$1260 to $2100 Year

to start

Men—Women
18 to 50
STEADY WORK

Many Winter and Spring examinations expected

Common education usually sufficient

Mail coupon Today—SURE

MAIL COUPON TODAY

Franklin Institute
Dept. M-260, Rochester, N. Y.

Rush FREE, list of U. S. Government big pay LIFE JOBS, 32-page book describing salaries, hours, work. Tell me how to get a position.

Name.....

Address.....

SAVE ON TIRES

New Low Prices!

DEALERS WANTED

$2.15
29x4.40-21

$2.45
28x4.75-19

GOODYEAR
Firestone · Goodrich · U.S. AND OTHERS

ATLAS SUPER VALUES

This old reliable company is first choice with thousands of motorists who demand highest quality at lowest cost. Actual tests on roughest roads prove that standard brand tires reconstructed by the scientific Atlas process deliver **50 to 60% more service. Order today, save money. Orders filled promptly.**

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.35	0.85
30x4.50-21	2.40	0.85
28x4.75-19	2.45	0.95
29x4.75-20	2.50	0.95
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
...5.50-17	3.35	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
...6.00-16	3.75	1.45
...6.00-17	3.40	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3.....	$2.25	$0.65
30x3½....	2.35	0.75
31x4.....	2.95	0.85
32x4.....	2.95	0.85
33x4.....	2.95	0.85
32x4½....	3.35	1.15
33x4½....	3.45	1.15
34x4½....	3.45	1.15
30x5.....	3.65	1.35
33x5.....	3.75	1.45

Finest Quality Tubes! Well-Known Brands at Lowest Prices in History!

All tubes new guaranteed. Circular molded; of finest heavy guage heat-resisting red rubber.

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

TRUCK BALLOON

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20....	$3.75	$1.65
6.50-20....	4.45	1.95
7.00-20....	5.95	2.95
7.50-20....	6.95	3.75
8.25-20....	8.95	4.95
8.25-22....	9.95	4.45
9.00-20....	10.95	5.65
9.75-20....	13.95	6.45

HIGH PRESSURE

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5.....	$4.25	$1.95
33x5.....	3.75	1.45
32x6.....	7.95	2.75
36x6.....	9.95	3.95
34x7.....	10.95	3.95
38x7.....	10.95	3.95
36x8.....	12.45	4.25
40x8.....	15.95	4.95

All Other Sizes — **Orders Filled Promptly**

WE RECEIVE HUNDREDS OF LETTERS LIKE THESE:

"Please send me two more tires. The ones I got are very satisfactory."
N. R. Brocious,
Pennsylvania

"Two years ago I bought two 28 x 4.75 tires from you and was pleased with them. Kindly let me know at once if you have any 30 x 3½ in stock. Also your price."
G. R. Nyquist
Rockford, Ill.

Send $1.00 Deposit with each tire ordered ($4.00 deposit on each truck tire). Balance C. O. D. If you send cash in full deduct 5%. Year's service guaranteed, or replacement at ½ price. **Order today.**

SAVE MONEY—ORDER TODAY

ATLAS TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 1625
6250-52 South Morgan Street

Gentlemen: Please ship the following to

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

*Town*_____

QUAN.	SIZE TIRES	SIZE TUBES	PRICE EACH	TOTAL

ATLAS TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 1625, 6250 S. Morgan St., Chicago

Take part in the great

WARNER BROTHERS PICTURES

AND

BLACK MASK

MAGAZINE

MYSTERY STORY CONTEST

During 1935 WARNER BROTHERS will produce a series of twelve detective-mystery-pictures by the outstanding detective story writers of the present day. They will be elaborately produced as feature pictures with famous Star casts. Watch the theater advertising in your paper for announcements of these pictures.

BLACK MASK Magazine—the outstanding detective story magazine in America—has joined hands with Warner Bros. to conduct a great nationwide mystery story contest in connection with these pictures. Beginning in the February issue of Black Mask, and continuing in the March issue, now on sale everywhere, there will be published each month a mystery story without the ending. The contest is to guess the ending, from the information given. Many valuable prizes will be awarded each month by Black Mask; and in addition, at the end of the contest, Warner Bros. have selected, and will award, the following—

GRAND PRIZES

2 vacation cruises from New York to Bermuda, to Nassau, and back to New York;

2 vacation cruises from New York to Bermuda and return;

ON THE

FURNESS BERMUDA LINES

These cruises will be on the finest of the Furness Line ships—"The Queen of Bermuda" and "The Monarch of Bermuda" and will be glorious vacations for the fortunate winners.

Get a copy of March Black Mask today for full details of prizes, rules and conditions, and the second Mystery Story of the Contest.

. . . . Those eyes were looking wistfully over the crowd at something far removed from the tawdry little circus.

Queen of Saddle Valley

By Robert Dale Denver

One shot from ambush would bring the strong, virile figure of Lee Quirk from the saddle. And because he was the leader of those who sought to preserve their range, it was Lee whom the forces of evil were out to get.

CHAPTER I

Wild West Show

YOUNG LEE QUIRK was on the prowl. With a deputy sheriff's badge pinned on the shirt beneath his coat, he was looking for the killer who had held up and shot to death a restaurant owner back in Caldera. It was a dangerous hunt, for the murderer would most likely shoot in an effort to escape arrest.

Lee Quirk had no liking for the job, but that was not because of the danger. Man-hunting simply wasn't his line. Back in Saddle Valley, north of Caldera, he owned a ranch, a two-bit outfit, with a few pockets of range and a big water-hole that would be liquid gold if the drouth kept up. Ranching was his business, but, through coincidence, at a little railroad siding, Lee Quirk had happened to see a stranger boarding the train for Wills City. That stranger, as it later developed, had been the hold-up man who had fled from Caldera after killing Cowboy Tom Hargis, crippled owner of the Caldera Café.

Lee Quirk was the only man who could identify the murderer; accordingly, Sheriff Sam Fortescue had pinned a deputy badge on Lee and sent

him to Wills City to find and bring back the fugitive. There Quirk had received a tip that the killer might be found hanging around the Wild West show then playing in Wills City. And therefore Quirk was haunting the circus.

His grim errand had lent a hard glint to Lee's ordinarily friendly light blue eyes, had given a serious cast to the squarish-chinned face. Under his coat, stuck into the belt of his trousers, was a walnut-stocked six-shooter. Quirk knew the odds were even that he would have to use the weapon to get his man.

Alert, watchful, certainly the young rancher deputy was in no mood to pay attention to pretty faces. A hunt for a desperado is decidedly no time to be noticing whether a girl's eyes are really black or just so intensely blue that they seem black.

Business and pleasure—the pleasure of looking at the girl trick rider in the little Wild West show pitched on a vacant lot near Wills City's business section—did not mix. Lee Quirk knew that, and yet with his first glance at the girl on the blood-bay gelding, he had forgotten why he was in Wills City. Unconscious of the jostling crowd about him and the blare of the cowboy band, he stepped into a new world in which there were just two people, the girl on the blood-bay gelding and Lee Quirk, whose heart was unaccountably hammering against his ribs.

A down-at-the-heels circus, this Arizona Bill's Great Wild West, with patched canvas walls enclosing its arena, faded, tattered, sadly lacking the glory and grandeur of the stirring pageants with which the immortal Buffalo Bill had toured America and Europe. Arizona Bill's was a combination rodeo and Wild West show, playing Wills City during the town's annual celebration of the discovery of the first well in the near-by rich oil field. Afternoons and evenings there were almost continuous performances, one every two hours, fifty cents admission for the non-reserved, faded, blue circus boards that seated the audience behind a protecting screen of heavy woven-wire fencing.

Ten minutes before each show, a cowboy band in pink chaps and silk shirts marched out to play range song selections. Following the band, there shuffled out a half-dozen homesick Indians in blankets and feathered headdresses. Then, with six-shooters barking and yips sounding shrilly, the performers of the show rode out in single file. Lining up in a row facing the crowd, they sat their saddles while a leather-lunged barker described the marvels of Arizona Bill's Great Wild West spectacle, particularly the feats of those "duh-hairing ruh-hiders of the puh-lains, the kings and queens of the rodeo world."

During this brassy ballyhoo, the mounted cowboys and cowgirls, three of the latter, stared out over the heads of the crowd. While Arizona Bill's Great Wild West spectacle might be tawdry and cheap, the riders were not. They were the genuine article, people from the range, bearing the virile stamp of the outdoors. Of the three cowgirls, one was a Mexican, wife of one of the men ropers; another was a blondish, none too young lady bronc-rider. The third, a trick rider and roper, was the girl who sat a silver-mounted saddle on the flashy-looking blood-bay. She was dressed in red and black; black, silver-banded velour sombrero; red silk shirt and jet black short jacket with bullion braid; red velvet trousers, split from the calf down and showing satin under the lacings.

Not that Lee Quirk noticed much what she wore, except for the impression of a vividly clad, lithe figure sitting as lightly as thistle in the silver-trimmed saddle a-top the restless red horse. It was the dark pools of her eyes that caught him first. To Lee it seemed that those eyes were looking wistfully over the crowd at something far removed from the tawdry little

circus. Even if those eyes, glowing like dark stars illumined by some inner fire, had looked out from a mask, they would have held Lee Quirk. Set in a delicately featured face, they were enough to make the head of any man whirl, even a man-hunter's.

Lee Quirk had stood as if paralyzed during the ballyhoo, until the riders loped behind the canvas walls to begin their performance. Then in a daze, still seeing the girl's oval face with scarlet lips and luminous dark eyes, Lee automatically followed the crowd past the ticket booth and the raucous ballyhoo man—"only fifty cents, folks, four-bits, half a round silver dollar"—and climbed to a seat near the saddling chutes. To him the events of the program were only a blur—the grand entrance, the cowboy and cowgirl horseback quadrille in which the girl appeared, the chase of the stage-coach by Indians, the riding and roping exhibitions. Of it all he remembered only the girl on the blood-bay, dressed now in a pair of work trousers and rubber-soled shoes, going through the dangerous routine of the trick rider. She had perfect coordination of muscles, cold nerve, and a steel-like strength in her fine-boned, graceful body.

Not until it was all over and he was out on the street again did he remember that he was in Wills City to hunt a killer, and that he must watch the entrances both front and back for the man he had seen at the railroad siding. During the rest of the afternoon he was on hand each time the band blared for a new performance, watching the Indians and riders appear, with them the girl in black and red.

Lee resented the fact that she could be stared at by all manner and sorts of men. She didn't belong there; she belonged—well, if somebody asked him, in a palace. Lee, in fact, worked up a positive indignation, and when a fat man standing next to him nudged Lee with his elbow and made a casual suggestive remark about the "baby in red," Lee all but exploded. The man nearly had an apoplectic stroke when Lee turned on him, glowering.

The leer on the fat man's face disappeared suddenly, and he flung up his hands in alarm, seeing Lee Quirk, six feet of bone and muscle, suddenly transformed from an easy-going cowboy into a deadly, menacing avenger. His laugh dried up, his mouth gaped open, fish-like.

"N-no h-h-harm, cowboy," he stuttered. "I didn't know yuh knowed her," he flung back as he slunk quickly away.

Lee Quirk shook himself. He was going loco. He had been on the point of reaching out to squeeze that fat neck. This had gone plumb too far. Here he was searching for a murderer, and he had been almost ready to kill someone himself.

It was at this moment that he caught a glimpse of the man he had seen at the railroad siding, the fugitive from Caldera. The fellow, dressed well and somewhat flashily, was wedged in the crowd just in front of Lee. Quirk started to move forward and then, reconsidering, stopped. Men and women and children were all about them; to try to arrest the killer now would endanger the lives of innocent people. He would have to wait.

Meanwhile he could see that the man was nervous, occasionally twisting about uneasily to look behind him. As he turned once, he happened to look squarely into Lee Quirk's face. At once he gave a noticeable start, identifying the cowboy he had seen before he boarded the train and guessing that he was being hunted. For a few moments the man, as husky as Quirk and taller, stood stock-still, then his right arm crooked and raised. Quirk tensed a little, wondering if he were going for a gun in a shoulder holster.

Instead the man shoved his narrow-brimmed felt hat far back on his head and then, bringing it forward, repeated the gesture. Maybe, thought Quirk, that was a signal of some kind, an appeal or a warning to a companion.

Quirk didn't know; didn't care. As the man began to edge his way through the crowd, Quirk followed.

The ballyhoo man had concluded his harangue, and the crowd was moving to buy its tickets for the performance. Something had held up the line of riders, and the fugitive was heading for them, as if he intended to dart among them and on back into the show. The light was none too good. Dusk had come.

Quirk followed warily, closing in on his man little by little as they got to the outskirts of the crowd. The fugitive had turned away from the horses a bit, and Quirk's hand fell to his gun. He wasn't going to shoot unless he had to. The thought came that a flying tackle, knocking his man off his feet and pinning him to the ground, would be the surest plan for making a bloodless capture.

He was near enough now for a leap when a sudden scream came, from a woman. Turning a little to look, Quirk was astounded to see the blood-bay gelding plunging toward him. The face of the girl rider was set in evident determination to ride him down. There was no time to consider; Lee Quirk gathered himself to make a tremendous leap that would take him out of the path of the horse and up with the killer.

He escaped the horse and clamped his arms hard about the body of the man, bringing him to earth crashingly. Next instant he was engaged in a life and death struggle. He was a fighter, the killer of Cowboy Tom, twisting about like a snake, trying to bring up a gun that he had had in his hand when Lee had jumped. Quirk caught the wrist of the gunhand, pushed the barrel skyward. Cursing, frothing with rage, the man, with a strength that matched that of Lee's range-hardened muscles, jerked the gun away and used the weapon as a club, bringing it down viciously along Quirk's bare head. The iron nearly scraped Quirk's ear from its roots. Partly dazed by the force of the impact, the rancher fought off the blackness that threatened to engulf him, knowing he faced certain death.

Savagely Quirk struggled, managing to get hold of the wrist of the gunhand again, while, with a granite fist, he sent hard, jolting jabs into the man's face. As they rolled on the ground, a blow of Quirk's smashed squarely into the fellow's chin, snapped it back. It was enough to stun the man an instant, and Quirk was able to jerk the gun away and to use it as a club himself. It whacked down on a shock of thick brown hair and Cowboy Tom's killer groaned and stretched out on the ground.

Quirk, trying to get to his knees, found himself lifted by the collar. Above him he saw a burly policeman. "Out o' that now, yuh hoodlums!" bellowed the officer.

The world was spinning around Lee Quirk, and in it were the madly whirling figures of a cop and a blood-bay horse and a girl rider.

"The little devil," he muttered to himself. "Tried to ride me down to save this polecat."

He knew he was going to pass out, but just before he did, he managed to mutter hoarsely to the officer: "Hold this bird. Killed a man at Caldera. Notify Sheriff Fortescue."

"Hold him, is it?" growled the cop. "Sure; and I'll be holdin' him and you, too, cowboy. What's this story about that polecat killin' a man?" And then he saw that Quirk had keeled over and that there was the glitter of metal on Quirk's chest—a deputy sheriff's badge.

"Huh!" grunted the cop. "So you want him held? I guess it won't take much to hold him," he went on, looking down at the unconscious husky whom Quirk had put to sleep. "He's got enough to hold him for a while, I'm thinkin'. A game one, this cowboy."

A fellow officer had run up and now departed to summon the wagon. Someone pushed through the crowd that had

gathered, a girl with eyes like twin stars, leading a blood-bay gelding.

"He isn't dead?" she asked, and it was unlucky that Lee Quirk had passed out and didn't hear her nor see that she was looking at him.

"Naw," said the policeman. "Neither of 'em is dead. It was a double knock-out."

Lee stirred a little and groaned, which satisfied the girl that he was alive. Inside the band was sending out the lilting tune, *Old Paint*. The show, even such a small affair as Arizona Bill's, must go on.

Yet for a moment the girl lingered, standing with the split reins of her mount in her hand, looking down at Lee Quirk. Then she mounted and rode through the entrance and to the back of the arena.

LEE QUIRK came to a little later, just as a police surgeon taped back his ear and put a bandage around his head. The big officer, Grady, had reported that Quirk was a deputy sheriff who claimed he had captured the murderer of the restaurant man killed in Caldera three days before.

Quirk at once asked about his prisoner.

"Rest easy about him," said Grady. "They got him salted away in a cell. Yuh got nerve, cowboy. Some of the people around there said a girl from the show tried to ride yuh down, but yuh dodged her and tackled that hombre. Want us to grab her, too?"

Lee Quirk's face darkened at the memory. He could still see the angry face of the girl as she spurred her horse toward him. But he was making no charges; he was satisfied in having found his man. Officer Grady went with him to a telegraph station where Lee wrote out a message to Sheriff Fortescue, reporting the capture. The sheriff, Quirk judged, should come after this man, who had been booked under the name Alder. Lee was hazy about his authority to take Alder back, and with the man safely corralled in jail, he considered his job ended.

His head still felt as if it had been mistaken for a football, and, without eating supper, he went to a hotel. The blow from the heavy weapon had come dangerously close to fracturing his skull. What he needed was a good night's sleep. He didn't get it.

During the hours he tossed about the music of the cowboy band still blared in his ears, along with the voice of the ballyhoo man describing the feats of "duh-hairing ruh-hiders of the puh-lains." And the girl in red and black repeatedly rode out to trample him down. Of course, he'd never see her again. Good thing he'd found out about her, discovered that she was the kind who would protect a hold-up man and killer. And he had been fool enough to think that the wistful look in her long-lashed, dark eyes meant perhaps that she was staring back beyond the city streets to cool mountain slopes and wide sweeps of range.

In the morning he got up and headed for the dining-room. It was there that the friendly officer, Grady, found him. The big cop was tremendously excited and indignant.

"A dirty trick they played on you Caldera folks, cowboy," he burst out. "A shyster lawyer in town got busy last night, worked a habeas corpus through a crooked judge and got your bird turned loose, without bail or nothin'. They claimed you had the wrong man. He took some train out, and you'll likely never get your paws on him again. I just heard about it this mornin'. That's what dirty, rotten, graftin' politics does."

Quirk's jaw set tight. "So they got him out?" he mumbled. Probably the girl had helped in that, too. It was the final straw. After this he'd have no trouble forgetting her.

"Guess that ends my job," he said. "I got no authority to travel over the country huntin' that hombre, even if I had any idea where to hunt him. I'm takin' the train back to Caldera and my

ranch. Grady, when you want to shoot you a big buck deer, come up to my ranch and do your huntin'."

Quirk shook hands with the officer and headed for the station. Yessir, he was through thinking about a girl who had helped cheat the law of the murderer of crippled Cowboy Tom. He'd never even see her again.

Which may be used to show how wrong a usually right-thinking young cowboy can be when Fate chooses to step in and jerk a few strings.

CHAPTER II

Heiress to Four Drag

THE Wills City Hotel, where some of the performers in Arizona Bill's troupe of "duh-hairing ruh-hiders of the puh-lains" stayed, was respectable, clean and inexpensive. Trust the rough-tongued lady broncbuster, Nan McGraw, to know how to pick hotels where a hard-working rider could sleep free from disturbance from drunken parties next door. For although Nan McGraw had had four husbands—not simultaneously, of course, but between jaunts to the divorce courts—her conduct and moral standards were of the strictest.

She and her roommate, Donna Cameron, Quirk's girl in red and black, were eating breakfast, Donna in a pink negligée, it being natural that a young girl should want to get into something softly feminine after her working day was over. Nan McGraw, who had a masculine, rugged soul, was in plain pajamas and carpet slippers. When a knock on the door and a voice announced a visitor, Jimmy Fairgether, the crippled youngster who tended chutes in the show, Nan bellowed for him to come in.

The boy entered, eager-eyed, pitifully hunched from a bad fall. He was bringing the morning mail—one letter. As he handed it to Donna Cameron, he tried to smile, but the girl saw that he had received bad news. She poured him a cup of coffee. Everyone liked Jimmy Fairgether. Nan McGraw mothered him and Donna "sistered" him.

"Bad tidings from the front, Jimmy?" Donna asked.

"Yep. Arizona Bill, he skipped last night. He knowed the show was goin' to be attached. Took all the cash. We got no more jobs, no hope of collectin' back pay. Better get your saddles and your horse before the sheriff grabs them as belongin' to the show."

Nan McGraw, blond, husky, whacked her coffee cup down on its saucer. "The hyderphobied polecat!" she stated her opinion of Arizona Bill. "We worked like a troupe of performin' dogs for him; put on a performance that made him money. And he had to gamble with those crooks, pickpockets and shell-game men he let drift along with the show, 'stead o' payin' us our wages and the debts he owed. If I ever run across that double-crossin' son of a Heely monster, I'll bend a sixgun barrel over his noggin."

Jimmy finished his coffee. "I'll go cut and see about your saddles and outfits and Donna's horse," he offered. The trained blood-bay gelding, Chuckline, belonged to the girl.

After he had gone, Donna Cameron sat still, looking at her untasted coffee. Seen in negligée, she was prettier than in mannish riding clothes, which was saying a lot. In the saddle she seemed keen, bright, efficient, like a Toledo sword; in negligée, with her glossy black hair down over her shoulders, she seemed soft, a little helpless, utterly adorable. She had opened the letter Jimmy Fairgether had brought, had read it, and now she sat still, solemn.

Nan McGraw took the girl's silence for disappointment over the closing of the show, which, for all the hard work at least meant bread and butter to them.

"It's one heck of a life, ain't it, kid?" said Nan. "I been through the mill, and kin stand it. Take and give—that's me. But you, ding it, losin' your folks and a good home, throwed

out to root, hawg, or die. It simply ain't right you should git a slap in the face like this."

And still Donna Cameron stared at her coffee cup, while Nan McGraw talked on briskly, trying to cheer her up.

"Of course you kin easy catch on with some other show. But it's a tough life at best. If you c'd only git out of it. You're the kind, honey, that ought to be on a ranch, ridin' out with a husband that's crazy about you. You hate cities, crowds, noise. But talkin' about husbands, I don't know—I'm soured from the blame string of cutbacks I corralled. If it wasn't a bulldogger what thought ladies liked to be treated rough, it was some loafer without enough gumption to slap a fly on the rump. And the men you meet while trailin' along with a 'Wild West'—most of 'em is jist slimy lizards. A husband sure ain't no answer unless you find the right one."

And still Donna sat soberly, as if shocked to silence by the news that Jimmy Fairgether had brought.

Nan McGraw was puzzled. It wasn't like Donna to be cast down. Donna had courage to face the loss of a job. She made a guess suddenly. "What happened, honey?" she demanded. "Somethin' in that letter that upset you? Trouble allus comes in a flock."

The girl looked up suddenly and then laughed. "This time it doesn't," she said, her low voice a little tremulous with excitement. "Read it, Nan, and weep—for somebody else."

Nan McGraw fumblingly put on her reading spectacles and gazed forbiddingly at the letter. "Hump! From a lawyer," she said. "Nothin' good ever come from a letter from them critters. Me, with all my divorces, I oughta know. I'd ruther not read it. What's he pesterin' you about?"

"It's about my uncle's ranch," said Donna. "I told you my uncle died six months ago, leaving a small outfit in Saddle Valley, up near Caldera. And I told you he'd quarreled with my father, and they hadn't seen each other for years. Uncle Dan was sort of queer, always lived alone. The estate has been in court, and I'm the only living heir that't been found. Uncle Dan died intestate—without a will—which means that I've got a ranch."

Nan McGraw was dubious. "If only somebody 'cep'n one of them forked-tongue law-wranglers had wrote you of it," she remarked. "And I wouldn't git het up over inheritin' a ranch. Look what passes for a ranch nowadays. Quarter-acre chicken ranches, rattlesnake ranches, fox ranches an' polecat ranches."

"But this is a cow outfit. And I wouldn't care if it was only a quarter section of land with not enough grass for a goat. It'll be home to me. Nan, you've got to come along with me. It's not much of an outfit, I know, and maybe it's got more mortgages on it than cows, but it's mine and I want you to share whatever there is to share. You've been so good to me, Nan. Just think—my own ranch. Ever since Dad and I lost our place I've dreamed of owning a ranch again, just some piece of land that would be mine. And here it is. You've got to come with me, Nan."

"Who, me?" said Nan McGraw brusquely. "Shaw, a tough old hen like me?" Nan McGraw had had only one child, now lying buried in a little graveyard of a lonely desert town. Donna had come as near to being her child as it was possible for anyone to be. "Me, honey?" she protested. "A chaperone sort of, you mean? Shucks, I wouldn't be no use, a cantankerous old woman like me that's been puttin' on pants and ridin' outlaw horses the last ten years. I'd just be a plumb handicap."

Donna Cameron's arms went around the older woman, holding her tight. "You aren't old," she said, "and you aren't hard. You pretend to be. You nursed that cowboy in Albuquerque who got hurt, and left money to pay for his board while he was getting

well. And you won't be any handicap. This ranch isn't so small but that there won't be plenty work. My uncle was queer but a good stockman, and he knew good range. Saddle Valley is a sort of cow paradise, from what I've heard of it. I won't take 'no,' so it's settled."

Two tears appeared in Nan McGraw's faded gray eyes. "If you really want me," she said, "I'll go and stay until some young fella comes along and drops a loop over you. If I had a daughter, I couldn't care any more for her than I care for you. Mebbe I kin help see that you git settled—married to some honest-to-gosh man, like that young deputy sheriff what grabbed that crook hombre of a Alder. I liked his looks."

"You're hopelessly romantic," said Donna. "Plenty of time for that later. But if I ever meet a man I like, I'm glad now it won't have to be through being stared at by a mob in front of a Wild West show. I'd like to meet him in a regular way—in some one's home."

"That deputy sheriff never come around to thank you for savin' his life from that scalawag pal of Alder's," said Nan McGraw. "Mebbe the hick thought you was tryin' to run him down to save Buck Alder from bein' arrested."

"Maybe. But he wasn't a hick nor a fool. What difference does it make what he thought? I'll never see him again. We'll have to pack and look up trains for Caldera. I'd like Jimmy to go along, too. He can ride range as well as anyone, and he's got no home nor any place to turn to now."

"Jimmy's a good boy," agreed Nan McGraw. "And he jist worships you, like all men do."

"Still running on about that," said the girl merrily. "You seem to think I have a fatal beauty that strikes men paralyzed. Shucks, forget it. We're going out to run a ranch, and what's on it, even if that's goats. But it must be worth something, for this lawyer says he can get me a few thousand dollars for the place. He advises me to take it; says the ranch is practically worthless, but a neighbor could throw it in with his range."

"When a lawyer advises you to do one thing, do just the opposite," said Nan McGraw. "I'll find out about trains. Jimmy, he kin ride Chuckline overland to Caldera, while we take the train. I'll stay for a while with you, Donna, and then I'll go back to the rodeos where I can allus pick up a few dollars pervidin' the spectacle of a ancient dame tryin' to keep from bein' bounced on the ground by some pitchin' bronc. Kid, this is a break for you—gettin' this ranch. It makes me want to bawl like a calf under the brandin' irons I'm so happy for you."

WHEN they got off the train the next afternoon, Donna Cameron and Nan McGraw found Caldera a dusty little town, plainly devoted to the interests of cows and ranchers. Huge shipping pens lay along the tracks; the stores were the large establishments typical to the cow country, carrying everything from pins to wagons.

Saddle Valley lay to the north, hemmed in by mountains black with pines. The whole country was high enough to be cool for all that it was not far above the Mexican Border, Nan McGraw and Donna stood sniffing the air, "jist like two old range-raised hosses sent back to the country after pullin' a milk wagon in town," said Nan.

Donna was so anxious to get out to the ranch that she would have hired a livery rig to make the drive that night, but she knew there were certain preliminaries to be gone through before she could take possession. It was too late to see the lawyer in charge of the property that day, so they hunted up a hotel, finding one built in the Spanish syle with its rooms about a grassy court.

They slept in a room in a corner of the patio in an old canopied Mexican

bed under a ceiling made of cactus canes. Donna was out early, soaking in the warm sun which laid yellow patches between the trunks of big trees that lined the streets, and looking at the valley—her valley, she already called it. The cheerful smiles and friendly good-mornings of the townspeople, exchanged by strangers and acquaintances alike in the hospitable Western fashion, made it seem like a home-coming to Donna. She had been raised in ranch country, learning riding from actual work on the range and her trick stunts from a neighboring ranch couple who made the circuit of the rodeos.

Judge Mackilwait, the lawyer in charge of the estate, did not get to his office until the morning was half over. Nan McGraw went with Donna, determined to outwit any attempts to flimflam the girl. When they entered the private office of Judge Horace Mackilwait, called a judge by courtesy, the girl felt that Nan's suspicions of crookedness might have been justified. Mackilwait looked none too trustworthy; he was a fat man, with tiny, beady eyes stuck in a doughy face which dropped in twin chins. The snaky glitter in his small eyes was more pronounced when Donna told him her name.

"Miss Cameron, eh?" he purred. "I had no idea that I would have the pleasure of a visit. And I had no idea that the owner of the ranch was—uh—quite so beautiful a young woman. Please to take chairs, ladies, and we will talk this over. You did absolutely right in coming here to look personally into the affairs of the estate."

"I'm sure of that—since we come into your office," Nan McGraw stated with a hard look at the lawyer.

Judge Mackilwait coughed and, settling in his deep chair, studied Donna with his bright little eyes. "You will want to sell the ranch to the best advantage, of course," he said. "And for cash. I'm glad that I have found a purchaser who is able to pay cash, enough of it to buy you a lot of pretty new dresses and hats."

"Which happen to be things I can get along without," said Donna. "And why should I sell?"

"Why—uh," Judge Mackilwait stammered, "you see— Why, not to sell would be sheer insanity," he burst out. "It's impossible for you to run that ranch. I can see that you're filled with enthusiasm at the idea of owning a real cow ranch. Beautiful country, of course, Saddle Valley, but that doesn't make a ranch there any easier to run. You know nothing of the thousand details of handling an outfit. It's a man's job, or someone who can ride and rope and who knows about cattle raising."

"I guess Donna would qualify then," said Nan McGraw sarcastically, "except that she helped her father run his ranch, and that she can ride and rope better than half the birds that call themselves cowboys. Admittin' that she could run that ranch about as well or better than most men, just what is the snarl in the rope, Judge?"

"Just this," he said. "I stand corrected; Miss Cameron is not a tenderfoot. There's a reason why a ranch in Saddle Valley is not a good proposition for anyone just now. Ordinarily it's fine cattle range, taken with the surrounding mountains where cattle run all summer. But this year there's been a bad drouth; range is very short in the valley. Cattle are already beginning to drift down to winter there, and the rest will have to be brought down before the heavy snows set in.

"But short grass," he went on, "is not the only handicap. Saddle Valley has one serious drawback, the scarcity of water. There are a few wells along the foot of the mountains and a few scattered water-holes. Most of the water-holes are dry; some of the wells, too. That wouldn't be so serious, since for years the ranches in the valley have held their water and range jointly and shared them alike. But now a certain rough, tough group is fencing off tanks and wells, intending to let only their

own cattle water there. You've got very little water around your ranch headquarters, Miss Cameron. Not enough to run your cattle. That means you'll have to fight to carry them through the winter.

"And," he added impressively, "when I say 'fight,' I mean the sort of fighting that's done with guns."

"Neighbors that break agreements and fence off their water sound like a real drawback," Donna admitted.

"They are when they're as tough as these birds. They're what we call *cultus malo.* Plain ornary. Suspected of rustling besides. One of them, whose grandfather settled Saddle Valley in Indian days, is positively dangerous, a gunfighter. He figures to boss the valley. His name is Quirk, Lee Quirk. He's persuaded some of the neighbors that are about as tough as he is, to throw in with him in grabbing all this water. One in special, a old-time gunman, goes by the name of Bill Dilly—no telling what his real name is. Those two and the men leagued with them stand in with Sheriff Sam Fortescue. Pets of the sheriff, in fact."

"Anyone fighting these scalawags?" asked Nan.

"Yes. Just a well-to-do new comer, Nick Yantis, who came to the country recently and bought up the small ranches on the east side of the valley and made them into one outfit. Yantis' brand is the Cross in a Box. He's the man who said he would buy your ranch, which lies between his place and the ranches of this wild bunch. I think I might get him to go as high as three thousand dollars."

"For a cow ranch?" snorted Nan McGraw, who thought it beneath Donna's dignity to trade talk with a shyster lawyer. "We must have it wrong," she went on. "Mebbe this is a chicken ranch, or a rabbit ranch. Or mebbe a Plymouth Rock eggery. For three thousand dollars I guess Mr. Nick Yantis wouldn't expect to buy any kind of a ranch; what he likes must be the view. There sure couldn't be any cows or house or range throwed in with this place."

"I didn't say it isn't a fair small ranch!" snapped Judge Mackilwait, irritated by Nan McGraw's irony. "I'm just saying ranch, cattle and house won't be worth anything if a girl tries to keep them. Mr. Yantis has the money and the courage to fight these hoodlums led by Lee Quirk and Bill Dilly. So I'd advise you to sell."

"Of course, we'll have to see the ranch before we decide what to do," put in Donna. "I take it that I can go out and take possession any time. I presume that there are mortgages and back taxes."

"Well," said Judge Mackilwait reluctantly, "your uncle was rather a queer fellow. He left the place clear—no mortgages or unpaid taxes."

"What!" whooped Nan McGraw. "A cow ranch without no delinquent taxes and no mortgage nor notes at the bank? I'll say her uncle was a queer fella. Donna, you'll have to sock a mortgage on it right away, so you'll know it's really a ranch."

Judge Mackilwait looked rather pained. He didn't like the light way in which his advice was received. He suspected that this pair might be hard to handle. Annoyed, he turned to the window and suddenly heaved his heavy figure up out of his chair.

"Look," he said, "there's the man who wants to buy your place coming into town now. Nick Yantis."

Donna and Nan saw two riders jog-trotting down the street. "That's Yantis on the left," said the lawyer. "The big man is his foreman, Nub Baker."

The man on the left was a six-footer, approaching middle age, decidedly handsome, sporting a small brown mustache. The rider with him was like some big rawhide range animal, with a granite, craggy face and looking husky enough to lift up his horse by the ear and toss him across the street.

"Mr. Yantis," said the attorney, "can pay for your ranch, cash—on the bar-

rel head. He's the only hope of Saddle Valley against lawless characters like Lee Quirk and Bill Dilly. Why not let me bring him up for a talk?"

"Go ahead," said Donna. "He'll be a neighbor of mine, and I'll want to get acquainted with all of them, good and bad."

"Real handsome he is," commented Nan McGraw when the fat lawyer left to summon Yantis. "The sort o' man I had in mind as husband for you. Well-to-do, the sort that can take care of you."

Donna laughed amusedly. She had meant it when she'd said she had no time for romance. Still this rancher, Nick Yantis, was pleasant enough when he appeared, with friendly gray eyes that were drawn as by a magnet to Donna's face.

"Judge Mackilwait says you're quite determined to settle in Saddle Valley on your uncle's ranch," Yantis stated. "Frankly," he went on, glancing at Donna, "I'd rather have the neighbor than the ranch. You might think we are trying to rush you into selling your place. We're not. Naturally you'll want time to think it over. It might be well for you to go out and live on the place a while to see for yourself what we Saddle Valley ranchers are up against this winter. If we let Quirk and the rest have their way in fencing up water, it simply means that your cattle and mine will die of thirst. However, I think that before very long I'll have this valley made safe for all of us," he added grimly. "It may take hanging ropes and guns to do it, but I think both can be furnished."

Donna put questions, to all of which Yantis gave prompt, frank answers, all bearing out his claim that Quirk's group were illegally seizing water.

"I'm going to bring my sister, Flo, over as soon as you move to your place," he went on as their talk finished. "You and she will be great friends. And meanwhile, until you can judge conditions for yourself, forget about my wanting to buy your ranch."

"Butter wouldn't melt in that Nick gent's mouth," said Nan to Donna as they left the office to return to the hotel. "A real nice-talkin' fella, and plumb overjoyed to have you as neighbor. As who wouldn't. Owns over half the valley, too."

Donna said nothing. Nick Yantis was personable and friendly, but she was concerned principally with having her own ranch, of being independent of riding out over the range and wiping out memories of the cheap, tawdry life of Arizona Bill's Great Wild West spectacle. On the street she found that she had forgotten her gloves in the attorney's office and leaving Nan to go to the hotel alone, she returned for them.

As she emerged from the lawyer's office again, she met a cowboy clumping along the hall in his high-heeled boots. Seeing his face in the dim light of the windowless hall, she gave a little start of surprise and came to a stop. It was the man who had captured Alder in front of Arizona Bill's show. He was in cowboy garb now instead of the suit that he had worn then, but she had not forgotten his face, a little hard, grim, that of a man who could be a dangerous enemy.

He stared at her also, and as they stood in the hall, a queer conflict of gladness and anger mixed appeared in his face.

"You?" she said. "Here in Caldera?"

"Yes," she returned curtly. "Happens to be my home town. And your killer friend managed to get away after all, did he? Congratulations." He touched his sombrero and went on down the hall, stepping into an office and slamming the door behind him.

Donna flinched a little as if from a blow, and the scarlet flamed in her cheeks.

Judge Mackilwait, standing in the doorway of his office, had watched the man go by, and now came out into the hall.

"That's your neighbor," he said in a

hoarse whisper, "the one who is raising all that trouble about water and range, Lee Quirk. As bad a gunfighter as there is in the country."

Having exploded that bombshell under her, the judge retreated, while Donna stared blankly at the door behind which Lee Quirk had disappeared. Tears suddenly sprang into her eyes, she didn't know why. Nan McGraw was right in her guess that the stranger must have thought that Donna had helped Buck Alder escape. Quirk really believed that she was connected with Buck. In reality Donna knew him only by sight; she knew that he had moved along with the show for short periods with a small group of crooks, tinhorn gamblers and plain pickpockets.

It hurt Donna to think that anyone could believe she would try to ride down an officer to keep him from arresting Alder. But she especially hated to have that young man think it. Still, what difference did it make what he thought? She had heard plenty about him, none of it good. That he was a rustler, a gunman, a trouble-making bully who was going to keep his neighbors' cattle from water that winter. Decidedly he was no angel, that Lee Quirk.

CHAPTER III

Shots in the Night

LEE QUIRK had returned to Caldera the day before, but had been forced to wait over to report to Sheriff Fortescue, who had been called out of town. It was not until the afternoon of the day Lee met Donna Cameron outside of Judge Mackilwait's law office that the sheriff returned.

Sheriff Sam Fortescue was heavy-set, white-haired, grown old in the service of Frontier taming. As peace officer for many years in Caldera County, he was deeply respected and admired. Lately there had been outbreaks of trouble which Fortescue had been unable to stop. Ranchers were protesting that their cattle were being stolen, Nick Yantis being the chief complainant. Then there had been an epidemic of robberies, two small banks in the county among the victims. The latest outrage had been that of the killing of Cowboy Tom. In addition there were preliminary rumblings of a range war in Saddle Valley. People began to whisper that Sheriff Fortescue had lost his grip.

The sheriff was in his office in the court-house when Lee Quirk entered and flung down his deputy's badge on the desk.

"Lost him," said Lee tersely.

"No, yuh didn't lose him," returned Fortescue. "Law done turned him loose. In the old days when a man got in jail for murder he stayed there until he was acquitted or swung for it. But not so any more. It was a tough break for me—their turnin' him loose. Folks say this county is goin' to the dogs account I'm too old to keep it herded in line. They're after my scalp and'll likely git it."

Quirk put his hand on the officer's shoulder. "Come out of it, Sam," he ordered. "You've rode out harder storms than this. The only bird tryin' to get you out of office is Nick Yantis. And his reason is that he thinks you'll side with Bill Dilly and me and the rest of us when it comes to trouble over water. Whereas, we know you'll bear down harder on your friends than enemies, tryin' to be square."

"I hope that range trouble of yours don't come to shootin'," said the sheriff. "Yantis has got the money to hire a raft of gunmen, Lee."

Quirk rolled a cigarette. "We sure won't start any gun-play until they do. But we got to protect our own cattle and range. Nick Yantis has bought cows until he's doubled his herd. The valley range simply won't carry 'em in a drouth year like this. As I told you, I've fenced in the water-hole in Apache Canyon, and I'm goin' to see to it that the only cattle waterin' there

are those belongin' to Bill Dilly, Courtney, the Budge brothers and me. Those boys likewise will keep Yantis' cows turned away from their wells. Which means that all Yantis' stock will have to use is a few small water-holes of his own and the deep well on his home ranch. His shallow wells are already dry."

"Refusin' him water means war," said Fortescue.

"Yeah, if he wants it. But we'd rather have war than to let this Yantis hog spoil Saddle Valley range. We're goin' to force him to cut his cattle down to where the range will carry 'em. When he does cut down, we'll share our water and grass same as we've always done with Box Cross owners before him."

"I ain't blamin' you a mite," said the sheriff. "You're inside your rights. But try to stay clear of the law, and keep your eyes peeled for underhand work. I know it's tough havin' it hinted around that you've turned cow-thief, but you sit tight and let 'em talk. You and Bill Dilly specially. Yantis knows if he gits shut of you two, he'll run the valley.

"Heard yuh got a new neighbor at the Four Drag," Fortescue went on. "A girl. Swellest-lookin' thing in this country since Zeb Smith brought in his pinto runnin' horse."

"Huh!" exploded Lee. "Is that girl takin' over the Four Drag? Why she's the one that—" And then the young rancher's lips shut tight. He was making no accusations. And so that good-looking but hard-boiled and even treacherous little lady was going to be his neighbor! In spite of his anger he confessed to a sneaking thrill that she was to be in Saddle Valley. In vain he had tried to put her out of his head. After all, he argued in her defense, she had been fighting for someone, and he had respect for a fighter.

"How you figure out this Nick Yantis?" asked the sheriff who had confidence in Lee's judgment.

"I haven't yet," admitted Lee. "He's nice and agreeable actin'; he seems to have plenty of cash and he wants Saddle Valley for himself. And although he lets his foreman, Baker, do most of the talkin' for him, I'd say Yantis would be a dangerous fellow in a tight place."

The two talked on for an hour, then Quirk went into the street and got his horse. Quirk, tall and rangy, seemed awkward on his high heels, but on a horse he was grace itself, one of the best bronc-riders in the country. That afternoon his neighbor, Bill Dilly, had brought in a bunch of his and Quirk's cattle, part of those they were selling to cut down their herds, mostly cull cows. Bill Dilly was waiting at the loading pens for the buyer to weigh them up, and Quirk rode to join him.

Old Dilly, people claimed, had settled in Saddle Valley right after Noah had let down the gangplank of the Ark. In size he was small and lean, thin, as some people maintained, from being sapped to support the most flourishing pair of horsetail mustaches around Caldera. He had come to Saddle Valley not long after the arrival of Lee Quirk's grandfather, and both he and Lee knew well what drouths meant. Yantis, as a stranger, didn't; and Dilly and Quirk had no intention of having their range spoiled while he was learning.

While the cattle were being shoved on the scales, Nick Yantis and Nub Baker rode over. Baker began inspecting the cattle closely.

"Look 'em over sharp," squeaked old Bill Dilly. "See that I ain't burned some of your brands over into mine." Which was a joke, as neither Dilly's Circle Dot nor Quirk's Three Bar brand could be burned over from a Box Cross.

"Back, are you, Quirk?" said Nub Baker who did most of the talking when he was with his boss. "Been takin' a little vacation on tax-payer money, ain'tcha? I see that you and your neighbors have fenced up the Apache Canyon water-hole and put up a boom-

erang corral there. That water-hole belongs to the valley. Always been used by all the cattle in Saddle Valley, same as the range has."

"It has, yeah," admitted Quirk. "But it won't be used by 'em this year. That water-hole is on my deeded land. And the agreement about joint use of all water in the valley was only on condition that the various ranchers held down the number of their cattle to certain numbers, and in bad years cut down still further. Instead of cuttin' down in face of the worst drouth in twenty years, you doubled your bunch of cattle, whereas the rest of us reduced down a third. You can use that water-hole same as usual if you slice down your herd same as we've done. It'll be money in your pocket if you do, Yantis. I tell you the range won't carry all that herd of yours this year, and you'll only ruin Saddle Valley."

"Tryin' to tell us what the range will carry," sneered Nub Baker. "I was a-raisin' cows when you was a cub. We're warnin' you we won't stand for havin' our cows boomeranged away from that tank, deeded land or no deeded land. And there's somethin' else. We been missin' cattle all year; are missin' more now. If the sheriff wasn't such a blood brother to you men, somethin' might be found out about that rustlin'."

Bill Dilly let out a snort. "Got any charges to make?" he burst out. "If so, spit 'em out."

"They got no charges," said Quirk. "And they know that when they have, Sam Fortescue would arrest his own brother. Get this, Yantis: If you want to ruin your side of the valley by overstockin' it this winter, all right. We're savin' our side from range hogs."

Baker opened his mouth for a hot reply, but Yantis grunted something at him and the two left, leaving Dilly and Quirk to finish with their cattle weighing.

"They're askin' for trouble sure 'nough," said Bill Dilly. "We'll be ready to give it. Last week the Budge boys took out that big supply of cartridges we ordered. Got 'em hid on their place."

The west side neighbors had pooled their money to purchase ammunition for what might be a small war Quirk hated to see it come; he had heard too much of bloody range wars to want to be in one. But if it came, he would be in it, as leader.

As the cattle buyer gave them checks for their cattle, a gust of rain was sluicing down the streets, bringing on premature darkness. As he got on his horse Lee again looked at a lighted window down the street, with a sign on it, "Caldera Café."

"Looks like Cowboy Tom's widow has opened up for business again," he said. "Le's drop in for supper. I got a mean job: To tell her that her husband's killer got away."

They were the only customers in the small place. Cowboy Tom's widow, a faded, weary-looking little woman, greeted them soberly.

"I guess you heard," said Quirk, "how I slipped up tryin' to bring that fellow back."

"I didn't hear it that way," said the woman. "I heard you risked your life to catch him and did, and then a lawyer threw a crooked loop and snaked him out from behind bars. Lee, you're the only one that could identify that killer as the man that the sheriff chased across to the sidin'. Did you ever think he might come back to get rid of you? I was outside in the alley just a few minutes ago, and I seen a man sneakin' along it. He looked a'mighty like the description you give of that tall fellow who killed Tom. You better be careful he don't pot you and get rid of the witness that could put his neck in a rope."

"He wouldn't come back here," said Quirk confidently. "But if he did, I'd admire to tangle with him again."

He and Dilly waited while the woman prepared their meal, a cowboy supper of steak, potatoes, hot biscuits and coffee, with wedges of peach pie.

Outside, with the coming of full night, the rain had stopped, leaving the streets wet. Ahead of the two was a long ride to their ranches, not a very pleasant one.

Bill Dilly swallowed a final cup of coffee and got to his feet. "Le's drag it, Lee," he suggested, and they said good night to the pathetic little woman whose husband had been shot down in this little room only a few days before.

"You'll be careful, Lee," she warned him again. "I'm tellin' you he looked suspicious—that man in the alley."

"Sure."

Lee nodded, forgetting the warning almost immediately, and headed for the door, trailed by Dilly, while the woman began closing up, turning out the oil lamps. As Lee opened the door he was silhouetted for a moment, only a short one, for behind him, maybe because she felt an inkling of danger, Cowboy Tom's widow had turned out the last light.

Which was probably all that saved Lee Quirk's life, when, from across the dark street a gun roared, and a bullet whistled past Quirk's head to smack into a shelf of china.

Lee Quirk had seen the flash of the gun. It placed the owner of the weapon for him, and his own belt gun whipped up from its holster and flung back a shot. Then he let go a second bullet, as he stepped out of the door to flatten against the side of the building. Bill Dilly, still a speed merchant with a gun in spite of his age, joined Quirk and whipped out two rapid shots. One more shot came from the man before he fled. Quirk and Dilly were barely able to make out his figure as he headed for the railroad station.

Quick dashed after him, firing again. That shot served to turn the man, to send him angling off toward the center of town, afraid to cross the vacant block lying before the railway station. Ahead of the fugitive lay a lumberyard closed in by a board fence too high to scale. He tried the gate, but, finding it locked, quickly sped around the fence corner into a side street.

Lee was gaining fast, and the man flung back a shot which sailed by Quirk's ear. Quirk answered and heard a yelp, just before the man ducked into an alley. Lee had scored a hit, he judged. High-heeled boots drumming over the board walk, Quirk pounded along and raced into the alley which led between high adobe walls. At the end of it a dim light showed the fugitive slipping through a door which Lee knew led into the court of the Caldera Hotel. He had just a glimpse of the man's sleek black jacket and the small felt hat, then the door slammed shut.

Quirk knew the patio of the hotel, knew there were only two exits from it, one the door through which the man had gone, the other leading into the hotel office. And yet when he raced inside and stood staring at the lighted court and the rooms opening from it, the place was empty. The owner of the hotel stood in the doorway leading to the office.

"Anybody go through the office, Kingsley?" Quirk called.

"Nope. I heard somebody runnin' out here, but when I got to the door nobody was in sight. Thought I heard a woman's voice just before I opened the door."

"Get a gun and watch to see that no one runs through the office," ordered Quirk. "Dilly," he told the old-timer who came puffing into the court, "he's gone into one of those rooms; he didn't have time to climb over the roof. And the rooms got no openin's on the outside walls, so we got him penned. He's left a blood trail where he went; I think I got him, prob'ly in the leg." He pointed to some small dark stains on the wet concrete walk which ran around the patio, connecting the doors of all the chambers.

"Careful how you close in on him," said Dilly. "The snake spits a powerful brand of poison."

Following the telltale trace of the

blood drops on the walk, Quirk came to the end room on that side. In this room as he remembered a light had been burning when he came to the court; now it was dark.

Quirk stooped and saw a little round, reddish stain before the door. Evidently the man had stood there for a few seconds, either fumbling with a lock or asking admittance from the occupant.

"Don't bust in on him," Dilly advised. "He'll be sure to pot you. And anyway, I wouldn't bust in; there might be a lady in that room."

Quirk rapped on the door. "C'm'on out, fella!" he ordered.

Promptly from the inside a woman's voice sounded sharply.

"What did I tell you?" whispered Dilly whose bachelor soul had been horrified at the possibility of breaking unannounced into a woman's room.

"Dang queer," said Quirk and hammered harder on the door.

It opened a very small crack and there appeared an angular face with stringy yellow hair under an old-fashioned nightcap.

"What you want?" asked the woman, and Quirk identified her as the lady bronc-rider in Arizona Bill's Great Wild West spectacle.

"Why—uh," said Quirk, confused by the sudden question, "you see there was a man shot at me down the street, and I—" Then he stared, for behind the stern face of the older woman appeared the two dark eyes that set his heart to galloping every time he looked into them. He should have guessed that the new owner of the Four Drag Ranch would be in here with this woman, and of course again trying to help the fugitive.

"It's the deputy who made the arrest at Wills City, Nan," said the girl in a voice that was soft and low but just a little husky, maybe with some excitement.

"Well, what in tarnation do you want now, Sonny?" demanded the older woman uncompromisingly. "Want to arrest us, mebbe? If not, kindly run along; we'd like to git a li'l' sleep."

Quirk had a toe in the door crack to keep from being shut out. For a moment he stood silent, looking at the girl behind the older woman, a welter of conflicting emotions stirring him. He was trying hard to believe that she wasn't hiding the man, in spite of all the evidence.

"Mebbe," said Nan McGraw, looking out at the two men, "you coupla smart cowboys think you got a right to snoop around, knockin' on people's doors."

"No'm," said Bill Dilly. "But we figgered a hombre might 'a' run in here. There's blood outside this door."

Lee Quirk trod softly on Dilly's boot. He had heard a little sound in the room, a faint little splat such as a falling drop of blood might make. He did not change expression, but the girl's big eyes widened.

"I guess he ain't in here," Quirk stated. "He must of gone through the lobby without anybody seein' him."

He turned and stepped away, followed by the astonished Bill Dilly. The door slammed shut.

"Get outside the gate and wait for him," Lee ordered Dilly. "The bird's in that room all right. I've got a plan to jump him so's nobody will get hurt."

Quirk sped through the hotel lobby, snatching up a chair on the way and passing swiftly around the side of the hotel. From the chair he was able to swing up on a *viga* pole and to climb over the low parapet to the flat dirt roof. In not more than half a minute after he had left the court he was on the roof directly over the door of the room where the wounded killer had hidden himself.

A few moments, and then the door opened and a man above average height, with the small felt hat and shiny black jacket which Quirk had glimpsed before, peered out cautiously. As the fellow stepped away from the door, Lee flung himself over the parapet, plummeting onto the man's shoulders and sending him to the ground.

The man, for all the surprise of that aerial attack, managed to twist out from under Quirk, to bring up the gun he had held. And once more Quirk found himself engaged in a desperate duel. They hammered each other, rolling out into the green patch of lawn in the middle of the court while Lee tried to keep the gun turned from him. With his own gun in his hand Lee could have killed the man, but held off until Bill Dilly rushed in and twisted the fellow's weapon away. After that the killer became quiet enough.

Lee took a good look at him. No doubt of it, this was the killer of Cowboy Tom, the same man he had captured in Wills City. Cowboy Tom's widow had been right. Alder had recklessly returned, perhaps to get rid of Lee Quirk.

As Quirk got to his feet, the two women appeared in the doorway of the room.

The girl stepped outside. "You have him?" she asked.

"Yes, indeedy, Miss," drawled Lee. "I have him, and this time you won't be able to hire a lawyer to sneak him out of jail."

"You think that I—" began the girl angrily, and then, flushing crimson, she turned to go back into the room.

"You didn't think that we was tryin' to hide him, did you?" demanded the older woman. "Say, cowboy, why don't you go borry yuh a set of old cog-wheels to use for brains? Why, we—"

"Please," the girl interposed. "There's no use talking to him or trying to explain. He believes we're accomplices, trying to protect our man. Let him think what he wants."

The door shut behind both women and left the men with their prisoner. The wind sighed through the wet leaves of the big cottonwood in the court. Quirk looking absent-mindedly at his prisoner, tried to figure out something that couldn't be solved. What had the two been driving at?

"Say," growled the prisoner, "I got plugged in the leg. Git me a doctor and put me in your hoosegow, and le's see how long yuh keep me in it."

"If I had my way about it," declared Bill Dilly, "I'd see that you never got took to it. There's too many cottonwood limbs around here that would look handsome with you danglin' from 'em. *Andale!* We got to deliver you to Sheriff Fortescue. And will Sam be glad to see yuh!"

The prisoner was received joyfully by Sheriff Fortescue and put in a cell with a shotgun guard in the corridor. After that Bill Dilly and Quirk started the ride back to their ranches. On the way Lee Quirk was silent, thinking of the girl. The evidence couldn't point any more plainly to her as an accessory in the attempted escapes of the murderer of Cowboy Tom. But something in Lee's head, or maybe his heart, kept questioning this verdict of "Guilty!"

CHAPTER IV

Home Sweet Home

THE Four Drag, when the new owner rode up to take charge on a lazy afternoon, was a vision of warm, brown walls against the green of pepper trees and slim, tall poplars, with a distant background of mountain wall where the scrub oaks were turning russet.

Donna was on her blood-bay, Chuckline, which Jimmy Fairgether had ridden from Wills City. In a freight wagon bearing supplies rode Nan McGraw and Fairgether. Donna, who had been making little trips of exploration over the valley, arrived at the ranch at the same time as the wagon. From her inspection of the range she knew that there was a hard winter ahead. The cattle that had come down off the mountain were ribby, and, with the cured grass short and scanty, they would have to starve through to spring.

The house itself was a rambling affair of unplastered walls, homely, yet spacious and comfortable. As Donna

rode up to it, she could see smoke rising from a chimney. Evidently someone was using it for a temporary camp. The lawyer had said that there had been no caretaker at the place.

At the sound of hoofs, the heads of two men appeared in the doorway. Both were cowboys, hard-bitten men, who stared out insolently at her.

"Headin' for somewhere, sister?" one of them inquired impudently.

"No," she returned. "I'm where I was heading for. I happen to be the owner of this ranch."

Both of the men looked surprised. "The boss didn't say nothin' about no owner comin' out. Said he'd bought it."

Donna didn't like their looks or their manner. "Who's your boss?" she inquired crisply.

"Nick Yantis," one responded. "But climb down, sister. Make yourself at home if you think you own this place. Me and Red here is glad to have company like yours."

She disregarded the invitation, eying the two, knowing them to be rare exceptions to the civil, friendly men of the range. The two looked her over grinningly, as if she were a livestock entry in a judging pen. It came to Donna sharply that she had hoped to escape all this when she had gotten away from Arizona Bill's Great Wild West. She would have given them an angry order to leave the ranch, but at that moment the freight wagon, carrying their trunks, Jim Fairgether's and Nan McGraw's saddles and duffle bags, chuck and necessary supplies, rolled up, with Jimmy holding the lines. The crippled cowboy's eyes were shining as he hauled back on the reins.

"Say, this is a real ranch!" he exclaimed boyishly.

"It'll do until one of us inherits a spread like the XIT in Texas," remarked Nan McGraw as she climbed down over a wheel. "Home, Sweet Home! Not a chicken or silver fox or muskrat in sight—it must be a real cow ranch. Where'll we unload?"

"I wouldn't be in no hurry to unload a-tall, Gran'maw," put in the larger of the two Yantis riders. "Happens me and Red is livin' here now, and we got no orders to move."

Through the open door the girl saw a litter of unswept floors which included a pile of empty tin cans dropped in a corner.

"No orders to move, eh?" she said coolly. "That won't hold you long. Here are your orders! Will you kindly take yourselves and your rubbish out of my house? You can leave it all in a shed until Mr. Yantis sends over for it."

The taller of the two, his long, bony face splotched with brown spots, only snickered at this. "Where we are suits us, sister. But if you're impatient, move right in with us and make yourself at home. Plenty room for us all."

"Well, harken to that!" burst out Nan McGraw, her eyes snapping. "You unwashed, spavined, box-ankled, windbellied cockroaches, don'tcha know enough to git out without bein' kicked in the rear fu'st?"

Jimmy Fairgether had climbed down. As the crippled puncher came toward the two, his eyes were blazing. But the big husky of the pair caught the hunchback and shoved him back violently. "Hold on," he said. "Git outa this and go climb a tree, you monkey. We don't object to ladies movin' into our private quarters, but that don't go for a man or what has somethin' the shape of a man."

Jimmy Fairgether, ignoring the fact that either of the two men was twice his size and that they both had guns, lashed out with a blow that caught the bigger of the two under the chin and sent him back. The big husky spat out a curse, and sent a big paw diving for his gun. A muffled exclamation came from Donna; she realized that the big man was the sort who would shoot Jimmy as if he were a stray dog. Donna had no gun, but she still carried her quirt, looped on her wrist. And now she flashed in, swinging the

heavy-leaded end of the whip. It came down to strike the wrist of the hand rising with the pistol, delivering a blow with all the power of an arm strengthened by the acrobatic feats of a trick rider.

A howl of pain came from the man, and the gun fell from numbed fingers. Snarling like a wounded animal, he swung on the girl, holding his injured wrist with his left hand. His red-headed companion had also started to draw his gun, but Jimmy Fairgether came in swiftly to grapple with him. Jimmy's strength was no match for the Yantis rider's; one blow from a sledge-hammer fist knocked the cripple back against the wheel of a wagon, stunning him.

"That's right, Red; knock out his brains," the other man growled between his curses. "Bust him with a bullet. And I'm takin' me this quirt and teachin' this good-lookin' she-wildcat to whack me."

He leaped in now, catching hold of the quirt with his uninjured hand, jerking the girl close to him. Donna had her hands full in her struggle, and meanwhile Fairgether was again in deadly danger. Jimmy had staggered to his feet and the red-headed puncher, who had slipped his gun out, was tilting the barrel down toward the cripple.

Which was where Nan McGraw stepped in. She had no gun either, but she snatched up a long stick of split aspen stove wood lying in front of the door.

"Here's where I cut me a dewlap on this wampus cat," she bellowed and, using both hands, swung the stick like a home-run hitter socking one over the fence. The club landed alongside the sombrero of the red-headed cowboy, and he stood for a moment, dazed.

"Countin' stars, are you?" said Nan McGraw. "Here's some more for you to count," and again the club descended. During her life Nan McGraw had bulldogged steers and chopped logs for cabins. This time the red-haired one jackknifed at the knees and went down, out of the fight. If the club had been heavy cedar instead of aspen, it might have killed him.

Nan turned to see Donna struggling in the grip of the injured man. "These woods is shore plumb full o' polecats," she remarked and once more she swung the stick. The big puncher had finally yanked away the quirt and now holding it in his uninjured hand, raised it threateningly over the girl.

Whack!

A howl of pain came from the big Yantis rider, and, dropping the quirt, he danced about, groaning and helpless now with both arms badly numbed.

"C'm'on, polecats, wade in; git your feet wet," said Nan McGraw, by now in a war-like mood. "Got enough, have you? Jimmy, git a bucket of water and douse that sleepin' beauty with it."

The redhead came awake, sitting up, holding his dizzy, sore head, and mumbling his anger.

"Climb on your feet," Nan commanded implacably. "And both you go and git your horses and high-tail it back to the hog-pen you come from."

They went, thoroughly cowed, walking to the corrals and saddling their horses and riding off. Jimmy Fairgether's head was developing a lump from his fall against the wheel, but otherwise none of the three had been injured and went about their work as if nothing had happened. Yet the incident threw a cloud over their arrival, seemed an evil augury of what might come. Donna had seen murder in the faces of both men; if she had not used the quirt and Nan McGraw the club, Jimmy Fairgether would have been shot. She wondered why Yantis found it necessary to hire such riders.

In the house was the original furniture left by her uncle, all substantial pieces that she learned later a Mexican artisan had made on the ranch. They removed all the effects of the Yantis riders and then began a thorough house cleaning, mopping, beating the Indian rugs, scrubbing walls and ceilings.

Toward evening, when they were making supper outdoors over a fire, there was a clatter of hoofs from the east. Three riders were coming into the ranchyard, past the pole corrals. One was Nick Yantis, and with him was a woman who somewhat resembled him, a striking creature in her late twenties, with a small, bitter mouth. This, Donna guessed, was the rancher's sister. The third was a man dressed in the gaudy cowboy outfit an Easterner usually wears when he goes "West," a middle-aged man with a round, small-featured face.

"I must apologize first for the trouble my men caused you," Yantis said as he sprang down. "It's necessary to hire the hard sort like them for this country."

"We probably caused them more trouble than they caused us," returned Donna, thinking of Nan McGraw laying about her like an Amazon.

Yantis presented the two who had come with him; the woman was his sister, Flo, the other a visitor from the East whose name was Harvey Willoughby. The latter had given the appearance of a ne'er-do-well from a wealthy family, who had come or had been sent West to make a try at redeeming himself, probably from the liquor habit. He was a weak, vacuous sort of fellow who, every time he spoke, showed his ignorance of the West and ranching.

Yantis had only dropped by, but Donna insisted hospitably that they stay for supper. They ate outdoors chuck-wagon style, while the moon rose over the comb of huge pines on the ridge above them, turning the ranchyard to silver.

Nick Yantis' sister said little, but she watched with snaky intent eyes the interest that the Easterner, Willoughby, took in the ranch girl who was to be their neighbor. Plainly Flo did not like it. Certain women seem born to hate each other; while Donna's feeling was not so strong as that, she did not care for Flo and realized that Flo Yantis in turn had hated her at first sight.

When they had finished eating, Yantis arose. "My visit isn't altogether social, Miss Cameron," he said. "If the others will excuse us, I'd like to talk over some affairs of state.

"It isn't about buying your ranch," Yantis went on as he and Donna strolled out across the yard. "It's something else. But you know, Donna, it's hard to talk business when I'm alone with you." Yantis' eyes were burning; his voice had a sudden vibrant note. "I'd rather lose my own ranch than lose you as a neighbor. My ambition is to own this valley and everything in it, and I warn you, now that you've come, you're included with what I want to own."

Donna refused to take him seriously. "You don't include Quirk and the other neighbors on the west side among the things you want to own?" she asked. "I wonder if there isn't some way of compromising on the fight over water. The grass does look awfully short. You'd only be hurting yourself by wintering too many cattle here. And think of the permanent harm you'd be doing the valley!"

"That's Quirk's line of talk," Yantis scoffed. "Just an excuse to fence my cows away from water—and your cattle, too, remember. Quirk and the others raise a smoke that they want to keep this range from being overstocked. A lot they care for Saddle Valley, a bunch of rustlers like them."

"You're sure they're rustlers?"

"As sure as I can be without being able to prove it in a court where the sheriff would be for them and their friends on the jury. They want to run me out, meanwhile stealing me poor. Lee Quirk has put up a boomerang corral in Apache Canyon, and he'll put it in operation in a day or so. That means our cattle, yours and mine, can't stay on the west side of the valley which has the best winter range. With that boomerang corral keeping our cattle away from the water to

which they're entitled, we'll either have to let them die of thirst or move them out of the valley. You and I simply lack the water to carry our stuff over the winter."

A bird's thin cheep from the shadows of the drooping pepper trees came drowsily. A coyote's yap came from a distant hill.

"We've got to join forces," Yantis went on, "and be allies against this ruffian, Quirk, and his crowd. You can trust me, Donna, to do what's best for us both. And when I've got this whole valley, I'll share it with you; I'll do more—give it all to you. I love you, girl. I never wanted anything half so much as I want you."

"Does the moonlight always affect you this way, Mr. Yantis?" said Donna. "You can't seem to keep to business."

"Hang business!" he said harshly. "What's business beside the fact that I love you? Loved you, Donna Cameron, from the first moment I walked into Judge Mackilwait's office. Then and there I decided that you had to belong to me."

His hand came out to try to take hers, but she turned away. This Nick Yantis was a queer person, impulsive, restless, unstable. Yantis puzzled her as he puzzled Sheriff Sam Fortescue and others. She couldn't quite place him; couldn't tell what sort of stuff was in him. She would have to reserve judgment until she saw him in action. Action, not talk, was the crucible from which the true nature of the man would emerge, either as a pellet of pure gold or a clinker of dross.

But she was pretty certain that she would never love Nick Yantis, even if he gave her all of Saddle Valley. Strangely, there intruded now Lee Quirk who hated her, who believed that she had twice helped a murderer.

"We'd better go back to the fire," she said. "I don't know what to do in this matter. I can't decide from the little I know. But I do know I'm not going to see my cattle die of thirst."

Yantis came closer, maneuvering her behind the screen of a lilac bush. "I said hang business," he told her abruptly. "Let's forget it. I said I love you. Doesn't that require an answer? Then maybe this does." He put his arms around her, holding her tight, bending to kiss her. With a sudden violent effort she broke free, to stand facing him in silent fury. At once he saw he had made a mistake.

"I'm sorry," he half whispered. "I should have known that you're too independent to be rushed."

"Let us say mauled," she put in.

"Please forget it," he begged. "But what I said still goes: I'll own this valley and everything in it—including you."

"Which somehow doesn't flatter me a great deal," drawled Donna. "It's too much like speaking of a horse or a ranch. I'm not sure I want to be owned by anybody."

They went back to the fire, and Yantis sullenly announced that they had to leave. Willoughby, in shaking hands when he said good-by, held Donna's hand an unnecessarily long time.

"When you offered to sell me your ranch, Nick," he remarked to Yantis, "you didn't mention having Miss Cameron as a neighbor."

"A good salesman always leaves the best selling point to be found out by the buyer for himself," remarked Flo Yantis, but although it was a compliment, her tone was venomous. Plainly Flo had been accustomed to having everything her way and looked on the rich Easterner as her property. She had had no feminine competition in the valley, and here was a rival who could overshadow her.

Donna was thinking of Willoughby's remark. So Yantis was planning on selling the wealthy tenderfoot his ranch. That might explain Yantis' crowding a lot of cattle on the range, for the value of the ranch would go up, of course, in proportion to the number of cattle it was running.

She stood by the fire listening as the beat of hoofs became fainter and

fainter. Nick Yantis was handsome enough to have put a spell on many women, but not on Donna. Something about him didn't ring true.

Nan McGraw, who was kicking the embers of the fire apart, had the same impression. "A queer lot, those three," she remarked. "Something phoney about all of 'em. And as for that little sister, Flo, she'll sure deal 'em from the bottom of the deck if she ain't watched. They oughta be a law to make females like that carry rattles and shake 'em all same as a diamond-back before they strike."

Donna nodded, yawned. Strange, while one man had been telling her that he loved her, she had found herself thinking of a grim-faced young cowpuncher with a fighting jaw and cold eyes. If he had been starting to make love to her as Nick Yantis had done, at least she wouldn't have been indifferent. But you couldn't be in love with someone who hated you, who believed you had sheltered a crook. Especially with a man like Lee Quirk, who was a gunman and probably a rustler, as Yantis claimed. And he was a heartless fellow to fence off his neighbor's cattle from water, to let them die, tortured, suffering. Only a beast would do that.

CHAPTER V

At the Water-Hole

THREE days later Jimmy Fairgether, who had ridden to Caldera, brought back a letter for Donna. Inside was a note, curt, to the point. The heading was merely "To Owner of 4 Drag," and below was one sentence: "This is to give notice that two days from date no 4 Drag cattle will be allowed to water at my tank in Apache Canyon." It was signed "Lee Quirk."

"Short and sweet," commented Donna. "Take it or leave it. Drive your cattle away or let them die of thirst. Business-like as pointing a gun at your head."

So Lee Quirk was really going to boomerang his neighbor's cattle, meaning simply that he would have a man working a device at the tank to allow Quirk's cattle and those of his neighbor allies to go to the water, while the Yantis and Cameron cattle would be turned away. It was, as Donna saw it, a rank injustice. It meant that cattle which had been using common range and water in Saddle Valley would be forced to graze on parts of the range where grass and water could not last all winter.

Just because feed was short, Quirk was taking advantage of his ownership of water to keep the most desirable grazing for himself, breaking an agreement of long standing. She could not blame Yantis for hiring hard men to defend his rights. If she had the money, she would hire a few herself.

The letter was dated the previous day; that meant on the morrow the boomerang would go into action. Stirred to hot anger, the girl, with Nan McGraw and Jimmy Fairgether, saddled and headed for Apache Canyon. They had ridden on the two previous days with Nick Yantis, one day up on the mountain, one in the valley, and had learned the names of the various canyons.

Apache Canyon, as Donna knew, had a small stream which ran all year round, emptying into the tank in its mouth, which could be used to fill other small tanks below, thereby supplying water to a wide belt of choice range. As they topped a little hill they saw the tank before them, lying in the jaws of the canyon mouth, an earth-walled pond with a strong pole fence about it divided into pens. Over the gate leading to the tank was a little platform where a man could sit and, by throwing levers, turn cattle either in to water or away from it. These unwatered cattle, if they weren't gathered by their owners and driven off, would die. Instead of going to other tanks, they would stand bawling until they became too weak to move.

Two men were at the tank, the mustachioed oldish Bill Dilly and Lee Quirk, putting the finishing touches to the boomerang. They kept on working until the riders came close, when Lee turned to greet the trio with a cool nod.

"I got your note, Mr. Quirk," said Donna, her voice trembling a little with anger. "Maybe you think you own this valley!"

"No," he said, "but I own part of it. This land is leased by all of the ranchers under an agreement to share the range. But I own this water tank and the land back up the canyon through which the stream that fills it runs. No, I don't own this valley; if I did there'd be no chance of range hogs ruinin' it."

"Maybe I'm a range hog?" she questioned him.

"I wouldn't say that," he replied. "But you've thrown in with Yantis, who is. I've got no reason to think that you'd play any squarer than he would."

"What makes you think I've thrown in with Yantis and that I wouldn't play square?" she questioned him fiercely.

A grim smile twitched at the corner of his mouth; in it Donna read a faint contempt. "You've been ridin' with Yantis," he said coldly, "and as for your playin' square, I have a notion you wouldn't know how."

"Because I helped a criminal escape?"

"Not just a criminal, Miss Cameron," he stated deliberately, "but the man who murdered Cowboy Tom in Caldera in cold blood. Cowboy Tom was a good friend of mine; worked for my father for years before he got too crippled to ride."

"Beyond the pale then, am I?" Donna went on. "And entitled to no consideration, no chance to prove that I'll do what is right?"

With flushed faces the two looked at each other. On his part, Lee Quirk was wavering. All along there had been a doubt in his mind, a ridiculous one, that Donna Cameron was not as guilty as she seemed. And looking at her now, that doubt grew larger. Maybe her actions in Wills City and Caldera could be explained. Common sense, however, told him that such a belief came from the spell which a pretty girl could put on a man. You couldn't trust yourself when looking at Donna Cameron. She could make you think that black was white.

"Supposing that the other ranchers in the valley won't stand for your boomeranging their cattle?" she demanded. "They may ride up and knock these poles down."

"That will be too bad for whoever tries it," he told her. "I'm within my legal rights. The only rancher who would want to knock this corral down is Nick Yantis; the other men in this valley are in with me. It isn't only this tank that we're keepin' for ourselves. Billy Dilly here, Clay Courtney and the Budge brothers are all closin' their wells and springs to outside cattle."

"Leagued against the two new comers, Yantis and me?" said the girl, and again, for a few moments, they stood eying each other from a distance of a few feet, but seemingly miles apart. Her pride would not let her tell this tight-lipped young fellow that she had been trying to save his life when she had spurred her horse forward in Wills City, and that in the hotel room Buck Alder, who had known the location of their room somehow, had forced his way in at the point of a gun. And that she and Nan McGraw, realizing that if Quirk came through the door he would be shot by the fugitive, had not given Alder away.

"I guess," said Quirk a little unsteadily, "that if we talked any more, we'd only keep quarrelin'. I haven't yet started to boomerang any cattle; I'll give you folks plenty of time to take away those that drift in here to water. I don't want to see stock suffer any more than you do. You and Yantis don't savvy this valley; the extra cattle Yantis has added to his herd will

eat this range down to the roots by next spring. If he doesn't cut down like we've done, he'll ruin us all. He's made us small offers for our ranches; what he wants to do is to force us to sell. He's got the money to buy feed for his stock, but we haven't."

Donna Cameron was too stubborn to admit that Quirk might be right. If his attitude had been less harsh, she would have listened to his arguments, but there could be no friendly give-and-take in talk between them as long as he thought her the protector of a killer. And even without that, it would do no good; this Lee Quirk was as hard as steel, capable of seeing only his own selfish view-point. She could be hard, too, and she could fight as savagely as a man for what belonged to her. She decided suddenly that she hated this Lee Quirk, both for his arrogance and for his stupidity. It was a different hatred than she felt toward the two bullies who had been camped at her house. She could never hate anyone as much as she hated this Lee Quirk.

Whirling her horse without a further word, she turned and, with Jimmy Fairgether and Nan McGraw, loped away.

BACK at the corral, Bill Dilly and Lee resumed work, kept at it silently for half an hour. Then Dilly straightened to rest his back from post-hole digging.

"Gosh, that girl is shore a stunnin' looker," he said. "There's been wars fought over women that couldn't hold a tallow candle to her."

Lee Quirk scowled. "You know, Bill, sometimes I git a hunch she's not as bad as we think."

"You can't tell nothin' about women by lookin' at 'em," said Bill Dilly from the heights of bachelor wisdom. "Women, they kin fool you; they kin talk and look like angels. You just got to watch an' see how they act. Anyway, we got a lot more important things to worry about than gals on fancy-lookin' blood-bay circus hosses. I'm tellin' you Yantis has been gittin' him a mighty rough-actin' bunch o' riders. While you was gone to Wills City, three more men joined up with him, and all *malo cultus* fellas, like that Nub Baker foreman. No tellin' how many gun-slingers they got over there. Some day they'll show up and—"

He broke off suddenly. "Speakin' of Yantis, ain't that him and a bunch comin' now?"

Some riders topped the hill and headed for the corral. There were two men, Yantis and his foreman, Nub Baker, in the lead, and following them the tenderfoot, Willoughby, and Flo. The girl, disdaining cowboy garb and saddle, was dressed in Jodhpurs, tailored coat, small hat and sitting an English saddle. Back of them came four of Yantis' riders, two of them the mean pair that had nearly killed Jimmy Fairgether at the Four Drag. All the men except the tenderfoot were heavily armed, with belt guns and rifles in their saddle scabbards.

"Second delegation to protest against boomerang corrals," said Lee Quirk, grinning, and more pleased at the prospect of swapping talk with Yantis and Baker than at that of quarreling with the girl owner of the 4 Drag. "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes, Bill."

The pair rolled cigarettes and waited the coming of the party.

"You can't git away with this!" burst out Nub Baker as he pulled up his horse and glared from the two men to the boomerang corral.

"Nothin' like believin' we can until it's been proved we can't," returned Lee Quirk easily.

"I'm tellin' you to open the gate to that tank and keep it open!" growled Baker.

"Keep your shirt tucked in, Baker, and take your cows outa here unless you want to carry water to 'em in a canteen," said Quirk. "I've explained you my reasons for the boomerang—more cows than the range will stand.

Saddle Valley is due for a long, tough winter."

"The cow business is always a gamble," put in Yantis. "And it may rain any day."

"Too late to do the grass any good," said Lee Quirk quietly. "And ranchin', when it's done right, doesn't have to be a gamble. I've cut down my herd; so has Bill Dilly and the rest of us small ranchers on the west side. But I know it's no good talkin'; we're as far apart as the poles. Don't think that this boomerang is bluff. I take it that all those guns you're carryin' aren't bluff either."

"With a sheriff of your own," sneered Nick Yantis, "it's easy to talk. But we'll push out our chips in this, sheriff or no sheriff. We've got the guns and men to wipe you off the map."

"The map of Saddle Valley is pretty big," returned Quirk. He and Bill Dilly stood, the two of them as brash as if they had an army at their back, facing Yantis and his five armed men. Although outnumbering the pair, Yantis and Baker hung back, unwilling to press the matter to a fight just then. And while they hesitated, Flo Yantis pushed in.

"You men with your talk about fighting!" she scolded them. "It's disgusting. There's no excuse for it."

All eyes turned to her. Flo enjoyed being the center of attraction, knowing that she was pretty, but not realizing that she would be much prettier if not for the bitter twist to her thin lips. People said that Flo Yantis was heartless and arrogant, but she could be winning, too, if she chose, and she chose to be so now.

"I bet I could settle this without a shot being fired," she challenged them. "Lee," she addressed Quirk smilingly, "give me a chance to do it. Will you speak to me for a minute?"

Lee, a little astonished, nodded. As she moved her horse aside to a place out of earshot of the rest, he followed.

"Look here, cowboy," she said, "there's going to be more trouble than you can handle. I can tell you that in advance. And I'd hate to see you hurt."

"Why?" asked Lee Quirk directly.

She laughed a little at that, and leaned down, her face close to his, looking into his eyes. "Well, maybe you could guess if you tried hard," she said lightly. "Why not be reasonable? Nick and Nub will get this valley by hook or crook, over your dead body if there's no other way. To be frank, buying that Box Cross Ranch was a speculation with Nick. He figures to get the whole valley and then sell it for a fancy price to some wealthy Easterner. He's been playing Willoughby along to buy it, and Willoughby, who hardly knows a cow from a horse, has about agreed to pay big money for the place.

"After Nick's cashed in, he'll go somewhere else and do it all over again. Willoughby will be needing a foreman at fancy wages. It would be an easy job for you to handle, Lee. I can promise that job to you if you'll be reasonable in this, sell out to Nick, and persuade your neighbors to do the same."

The girl pushed a strand of rebellious hair back under her small hat and smiled at Lee Quirk again. "You're mighty handsome, Lee," she told him softly. "I'd like to see you as foreman for Willoughby, running all this Saddle Valley."

"But you wouldn't be here to see it," said Quirk. "Of course you'll go with your brother."

She laughed at that. "No, I think not. I've got something better than tagging after Nick. I'm going to stay here as Mrs. Harvey Willoughby. But I'm afraid it will be rather lonesome, being Mrs. Willoughby. Don't you think so, Lee? Willoughby is not very exciting, not half as handsome and interesting as you are, Lee. You're the kind of a man a lot of women can't help falling for."

Quirk was embarrassed. This woman was hinting at something he couldn't

quite fathom. Evidently, from her little frown, she thought him stupid for not knowing what it was.

"When I first came here a few months ago, Lee," she went on, "you seemed to like me a lot. I didn't encourage you, for I had other fish to fry. I couldn't see myself making biscuits for a poor man who owned a small ranch, like you. But if you became foreman for Willoughby, marriage being what you want to make it, and a man like Willoughby not being the kind that sees much, why then you and I—"

She left the sentence unfinished. Her meaning was so plain that even a fundamentally decent and honest person like Lee Quirk could understand. He had before deliberately refused to read the obvious meaning into her hints, believing that no one could be so unscrupulous.

When at a dance a few months back he had met Flo Yantis, easily then the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and dressed in fashions that never came to Saddle Valley, Lee and every unattached man at the dance had found her very attractive and desirable. That had been before Lee had seen the girl for what she was, bitter, selfish, hard, attracting men for the sense of power it gave her, incapable of ever caring deeply for anyone. Looking at her now, Quirk realized that while the girl had been given the mask of an alluring, pretty face, that there was an ugly, unclean creature below. His eyes were enough to tell Flo Yantis that she had lost. There was not a chance of bringing Lee Quirk into the despicable intrigue she had planned.

"You fool!" she said venomously. "You fool!" She lifted the riding crop she carried to match her postage stamp saddle as if to splash Lee Quirk across the face, then instead she struck her horse and rode to rejoin the others.

"Come, Harvey," she called to Willoughby. "Let's get out of this. If these beasts want to fight, let them. I hope they kill one another."

CHAPTER VI

Range Challenge

LEE returned to the corral where Yantis, Baker, and the other four riders had dismounted and were standing talking with Bill Dilly. Battle still hung in the air, six men against the pair who were the leaders of the west-side ranchers. Yantis and Baker, Lee guessed, were thinking that if they wiped out these two, the other small ranchers would not have enough courage to continue the war, which was probably true.

The four men with Yantis, Quirk judged, were gunmen, of the type that hired out their weapons, mercenaries of many range wars, men to whom man-killing was a trade. They had ridden over today to start something, but so far were undecided.

Quirk was by this time in so angry a mood that he did not care what developed, would in fact welcome any kind of a fight, although he knew there would be no chance for him or Dilly coming out alive if a gun affair were started. And a gunfight it would probably be.

Baker, standing with the others in a semi-circle, stepped forward a little. "If there was a sheriff in this country worth his salt," he blustered, there'd be some ranchers workin' on a rock pile 'stead of tryin' to keep cows from water. But of course Fortescue is too busy to take time out huntin' for cow-thieves who happen to be his friends."

Lightning blazed in Lee Quirk's eyes. "Nub," he said, "bein' hinted I'm a cow rustler in Saddle Valley where my folks have lived for nearly fifty years is plumb serious to me. You've come over maybe to force a gunfight to settle this. You'll get Bill and me, but we'll get some of you. Nub, since you're hungerin' to shed a little gore, I'll make you a proposition.

"You want this corral tore down. Take off those twin guns, and if you

can clear me out of the road with your fists, you can tear it down. Lick me, savvy, Nub, and I'll agree to let it be torn down. If I lick you, you agree to let it stay."

Nub Baker was taken aback by this challenge. He weighed over two hundred pounds and was built for a fighter, having a tremendously long reach, packing a mule's kick in each paw, and being by no means slow on his feet. He had never lost a rough-and-tumble battle. That Lee Quirk, twenty-five pounds lighter, should challenge him, startled Nub. Gunfighting, it was rumored in Saddle Valley, was Lee Quirk's meat. He had seemingly inherited a natural skill with a gun from a sheriff father and a grandfather who had held Saddle Valley from the Indians. Baker knew that Quirk could shade him on a gun draw, but he was confident that no smaller man could beat him in a fight.

The foreman laughed and unbuckled his gunbelts, letting them fall, while Lee Quirk also disarmed. Then, flinging off his vest, Baker doubled his fists and came in, but not with a bull-like charge. He was swinging hard but not wildly as the two men met in a fury of blows. For a moment they slugged in a savage exchange, Baker's long arms lashing in with pile-driver force. Frequently Quirk saved himself by letting the big fists slip over the knobs of his shoulders, blows that would have smashed in the skull of a ram; then he managed to rock Baker with a series of hard body slams, slowing the bigger man, hurting him appreciably.

They shifted position and came in again, two men trying to hammer each other to earth. It settled to a merciless mauling in which Quirk struck the oftener and Baker the harder, the foreman figuring that sooner or later he would land a swing that was sure to knock out Quirk. And Quirk had to use his utmost speed to dodge that deadly whirlwind of blows while he slammed in jolting returns, waiting his chance. It came when the bigger man, unbalanced by a haymaker that missed, laid himself open. Quirk, striking like a rattler coming out of a coil, put all his weight behind a blow that landed on the button.

It was not enough to knock out the foreman, but it sent him back to fall and strike his head hard against a corral post. He started to stagger to his feet, shaking his head, temporarily dazed. If Quirk had rushed then, he could have finished the man, chopped him down again and kept him down, but he didn't want that. He wanted a clean-cut victory, not an accidental one. He waited until Baker, roaring like a wounded animal, rushed again. It was as if a pair of steel mallets were smashing out from some machine. Blood flowed down Quirk's face from a long cut over his eye, half blinding him. Yantis' men yelled triumphantly. It is claimed that a good big man can always lick a good smaller man, and Quirk was about willing to believe it.

Sheer courage only kept him on his feet until the steam again went out of Baker's punches, and both slowed down, waiting for a fresh surge of strength. By this time the faces of both men were gory; one of Baker's eyes was turning black, his lips were thick and puffed and bloody. Quirk, forced to wipe blood from the cut near his eye, had had his shirt half torn from his body. He guessed that a bone in his left hand had been broken against the granite jaw of Baker, but he was hardly conscious of the pain of that. His head felt as if it had been kicked repeatedly by a mule, and breathing was like soaking fire into his lungs.

He realized that he was beaten and there could be but one end to it. Baker was a fighter in a thousand; could have held his own with many professional heavyweights. Although Nub was as exhausted as Quirk, had been punished even more, his greater strength and size would bring him through a victor.

Dilly's voice came from the side as

they paused, panting. "You got him, Lee! You got him!"

Lee knew Dilly was lying, but he was not yet done. This was something more than a fight between two men. It was a fight for Saddle Valley. If Baker won now, it meant more than the tearing down of the boomerang corral; it meant that Yantis would win in the end, that Saddle Valley would be turned over to spoilers, stolen from the descendants of the people who had settled it originally. Lee was fighting as a man fights for his country. And although he hadn't the strength to lick Nub Baker, maybe he had the brains. He realized that there was only one way that he could win—some way break Nub Baker's nerve, make the foreman believe that he was going to loose.

Quirk straightened suddenly, and to Baker's astonishment stood laughing, actually laughing. Baker stared at him as if Lee were crazy.

"Is that the best you can do, Nub?" Quirk taunted him. "And I thought you were a fighter, and just possibly might be able to lick me. But you couldn't do it. I just been playin' with yuh, Nub. If you can't do any more than that, you're done for now. Pick out the place where you want to lay. You're licked."

And laughing again, Quirk came in, spending all the strength that he had conserved before. And that show of confidence hit Nub Baker like a blow in the solar plexus. There are some men who fight best when they are on top, wilt when they are the underdogs. Nub wasn't the kind that thrived on misfortune; he began to retreat. Quirk sensed that the man was uncertain, afraid, in a panic.

All the fire seemed gone out of Baker, and he moved as if on leaden feet. The exultant confidence that Lee had put on as a bluff suddenly became actual. Baker, backing up, his breath coming sobbingly, trying to shield his head from the punishing blows, stumbled over one of his gunbelts. At sight of the weapon in the attached holster, Nub stooped to grab for the gun, intending to pick it up and blast a hole in this foe who unaccountably couldn't be licked.

Bill Dilly stepped in then, merely tilting his still holstered gun down to drop a bullet that kicked the gun and made it jump a few inches. Which stopped Nub Baker. He stood, bent over the weapon, staring at Dilly.

"You reach for that gun ag'in," said Dilly, "and I'll drop your carcass on top of it. Yore carcass, savvy? Stand up and take what's comin' to you!"

Dilly's gun menaced the others in the half-circle of Yantis riders, held them motionless. The old-timer with the big mustaches had the coldest gray eyes they had ever seen.

Nub Baker stood panting, whimpering. For him the fight was over; he was unwilling to go through to the end, the final smashing which would send him down into unconsciousness.

"Done, are you?" said Dilly. "Then climb your horses and ride outa here, all of you. You're tearin' down no boomerang corrals today. Git!"

Weaving on his feet, Lee Quirk stood, through a haze watching the six men mount and wheel their horses to ride off.

As the last rider disappeared over the hill, his legs buckled under him and he went down. Bill Dilly splashed a bucket of water over him, and Quirk sat up.

"He had me licked," mumbled Quirk.

"Yeah, he had you licked," agreed Dilly, "but didn't know it. Had you licked the same way Yantis has got us licked, outnumbered, with stacks of blues agin our little piles of white chips. You won that fight, but they'll be still tryin' to git rid of yore boomerang. Won't pay no attention to the sort of bet you made on the fight."

"I know that," said Quirk. "But anythin' to keep away from gun-play as long as we can. Yantis has got a bunch of drygulchers workin' for him, but I think they may be afraid to try

a killin' yet. They know it would be brought home to 'em. I got a hunch they might try to get us some other way, lay some sort of trap to tangle us in serious trouble. The odds are agin us, Bill, but we got to win. Can't let a bunch like that Yantis outfit get Saddle Valley."

MEANWHILE they'd have to wait, to see what direction the attack took. The next day Quirk and Dilly started to shove away the Yantis cattle which had drifted down from the mountains to graze and water at the Apache Canyon tank. Every day they decided to gather a bunch, water them and haze them along the few miles across the valley toward the Yantis headquarters and turn them loose. Dilly and Quirk were not the kind to see an enemy's stock die of thirst, and it helped avoid trouble by quietly gathering the cattle and hazing them across the valley to their home range.

For a week he and Bill Dilly did this job, although they figured they ran the risk of meeting a drygulching bullet on these trips to enemy country.

Donna Cameron's few cattle they let remain around the tank; she had not had an opportunity to cut down her herd. It was not fair, Lee admitted, to treat a recent new comer as he had treated Yantis. That note he had sent the girl had been altogether too abrupt, and he wished now he hadn't sent it. He could have asked her pleasantly to call for her cattle. Sheriff Sam Fortescue said that the girl had not visited the murderer, Alder, now held in jail at Caldera for the trial that would almost surely send him to a rope. It would seem that she would take more interest in the man if she were really connected with him.

He had other things to worry about, however. Often as they rode in the valley, Lee and Dilly had the notion that they were being watched. A few times Lee ducked into the brush to watch a distant slope, and more than once with his field-glasses caught a glimpse of a figure, which he identified as one of Yantis' new riders who had evidently been following him. He grew wary; was careful to keep to the ridges where he could keep a lookout on the country, as his grandfather had ridden in the old Apache days.

Morning after morning, there was a little tingling of his scalp under the steepled Stetson, caused by a hunch that there was some lurking menace in the mesquite that rimmed the gravel flats and grama-grassed swales through which he rode. Somewhere death from an ambushing rifle might be waiting.

In returning from taking their daily bunch of Yantis' cattle to the home range, he and Bill Dilly always stopped by a small water-hole in a shallow draw where they looked over the cattle which were drifting down from the mountain slopes in increasing numbers. When heading toward this water-hole, the two men would separate to comb the country, meeting at the tank to look at the stuff watering there. No one claimed exclusive ownership of this small water-hole, which was drying up rapidly.

On the fifth day of delivering to Yantis' range their daily quota of cattle, Quirk arrived on the rim of the little hill above the water-hole to find Bill Dilly waiting for him. Bill had been looking at the tank just below where some forty head of mixed cattle were watering.

"You got a little job of brandin' to do," said old Bill. "One of your sleepers is waterin' below. How about you tryin' to snare the calf while I heat the iron?"

"I might be able to get that calf," admitted Lee, "bein' I'm on Skylark, champ rope horse of the valley. Where's that sleeper?"

"That un over yonder," said Bill Dilly, pointing to a six-month-old heifer with a swallow-forked left ear but no brand. "Just drifted down, I reckon. Ain't seen the cow it belongs to."

Lee took a long look at the animal

that Dilly indicated with a finger, and a queer look came onto his face.

"That's your earmark, ain't it?" said Bill impatiently as Lee calmly sat his saddle, glancing around the brushy rim and then sharply scanning the shallow trough below. "You don't seem very excited about puttin' a fat young heifer under your iron."

"Why, shucks," drawled Lee. "I'm downright overjoyed to git that heifer under my brand. You drop down the draw to start that brandin' fire; I'll circle the bunch and drag 'er down. That is, if you're sure it's all right to stick my brand on the critter."

Bill Dilly stared at Lee. "What's got into you, Lee?" he snapped irritably. "Course it's all right. A sleeper is a calf that ain't been branded, jist ear-notched by the owner. Ain't it, or is it?"

"I believe that is what a sleeper is considered to be," said Lee Quirk soberly, plainly baiting old Dilly for some reason. "Well, le's ride. I wonder where's the cow that heifer belongs to!"

"She prob'ly decided to spend the winter in California 'stead o' Saddle Valley," said Dilly sarcastically. "If you don't want that calf, I'll take her."

Lee only grinned and rode his mount Skylark down the slope toward the water-hole, spurs jingling to the animal's jaunty fox-trot in the still heat of the early fall day. It was nothing unusual to come across a sleeper; occasionally, when a rancher sees a calf running with one of his cows, he may catch the animal and merely earmark it to wait a more convenient time for branding. It's safe enough when he knows his neighbors are honest, as they had always been in Saddle Valley.

Nothing unusual about finding a sleeper, but as Quirk rode down to the water-hole, his scalp was tingling again. There was danger here, something that he couldn't quite figure out. He patted the six-shooter in his holster, made sure that it would slip out easily.

CHAPTER VII

Rangeland Strategy

AFTER Skylark, in a drumming run, had shown his skill at putting a rider in position where a throw could not miss, Lee expertly dabbed his noose on the sleeper. Then he dragged the bawling, sliding brute close to the blaze Dilly had kindled. Dilly, going down the rope, flanked the animal with a speed that belied his years.

Lee snatched the red-hot iron from the fire and brought it over. A heavy smudge arose from the left side of the struggling calf, but, as he branded it, Lee so stood that Dilly could not see the marks he burned. Loud bovine laments filled the air.

"Turn 'er loose," ordered Lee, and as Dilly obeyed Lee pretended to stumble and got in Dilly's road. When Dilly looked up, the calf had ducked into the brush, to rejoin the herd. Now from below came the angry bawl of a cow, and the animal came in sight, shaking her head and coming at a stiff-legged trot. It was evidently the mother of the calf. Joining up, the two mingled with the milling herd which suddenly high-tailed it off down the valley.

As they watched the herd running, four horsemen loped down the hill that rose immediately east of the water-tank, and drummed toward them. Quirk and Dilly identified them as Yantis and Baker, Miss Cameron and the tenderfoot, Willoughby; but neither Bill Dilly, cooling the branding iron by punching it into the soil, nor Lee Quirk, coiling his rope, seemed to pay any attention to the visitors until they were close at hand.

"If they had a few more they'd have a jury," muttered Lee Quirk. "And they brung on that Miss Cameron to witness my shame."

"What shame? What yuh drivin' at?" asked Dilly, but Lee only grinned, and as the horses pounded up, he turned. "Howdy, folks," he greeted

them jovially. "Miss Cameron and Mr. Yantis, I believe. And Mr. Nub Baker and Mr. Willoughby."

Nub Baker drew rein and smirked ironically down at the two.

"Your vision is plumb perfect at recognizin' people," he said. "Too bad it ain't so keen when it comes to brandin' livestock. Your Three Bar brand on one of Yantis' Cross in a Box calves will be hard to explain even to your own pet sheriff."

Lee Quirk's eyes went wide and round. "Was that one of your cows that come to claim that heifer we just now turned loose?" he asked. He turned to Bill Dilly and saw sudden alarm in the old fellow's eyes. Dilly was thinking hard and fast about what it would mean if that were a Yantis cow. Caught rustling, red-handed! Good gosh! That was serious.

"You mean you folks was up above watchin' me brand that calf?" Quirk asked slowly and as if with dismay. "I shoulda hunted for the cow first," he went on as if scolding himself. "No wonder I couldn't recollect when I sleepered the calf. But I earmark so many that it ain't surprisin' I should slip up on one—'specially if she'd been sleepered by somebody else as a plant to git me to put my brand on it."

"Accusin' us of a plant?" Baker flung back. "That's such a wore-out alibi that any jury in the country would laugh at it. No, Quirk, we got you. Cow-stealin' is serious in this state. You're due for a stay in the pen. And I guess this will throw a crimp into your plans to grab all the water and range on the west side of the valley for yourself."

Bill Dilly was trying hard to show that he wasn't disturbed. They had young Lee Quirk dead to rights. Only thing to do was to bluster through it. Dilly skinned back his lips under the huge mustachios in a war-like way. Maybe he could sneak to his horse and race down to get rid of the evidence. With that in mind he moved toward his mount, but Baker stopped him.

"Don't worry about the evidence," he snapped. "A couple of my hands are after the cow an' calf. Here they come now—" as a cloud of dust below heralded the approach of riders. "A clear case good for five years in the pen. An', Dilly, you're goin' to be drug into this case as accomplice unless—"

"Unless Bill sells out to Mr. Yantis for a song," finished Lee Quirk. "Yessir, a water-tight case. Even to havin' two disinterested witnesses, Willoughby and Miss Cameron. You could testify of course to seein' me brand that calf, Miss Cameron?"

"I—I—" the girl began hesitantly. "I thought I saw you branding a calf down here. I do know that the cow wasn't near it at the time. If the calf wore your earmark, there could be a mistake."

Lee Quirk frowned a little, puzzled at that. It seemed that the girl was actually trying to protect him, hunting a loophole to excuse him. And he was troubled again, thinking back to those two incidents which had branded her as the partner of a killer. This morning, even in mannish work clothes, levis and checkered flannel shirt, she stirred him as she had when first he had seen her outside the circus Wild West show.

With difficulty he got his mind back to the situation. The riders were sweeping up with their ropes to the Yantis cow and calf which Lee Quirk had just branded. Exultantly Yantis and Baker got down to examine the calf's brand, and then Baker let out a roar that must have carried a half-mile.

"What kind o' brand is that?" he bellowed.

The riders and Bill Dilly all looked silently at the brand. Bill Dilly was the first to make a sound, a dry cackle, triumphant, derisive.

"What kind o' brand is that, did you ask, Baker?" Quirk drawled. "A brand I invented for your special benefit." He chuckled as the men still stood staring at the marks he had left, sur-

face hair singed off over a large area, but no decipherable brand. "It'll brush off in a day or so. It was enough to make a nice smoke for you to see from the hill, where I guessed your party was hiding out."

Bill Dilly snickered delightedly. He hadn't noticed the brand that Lee had put on the calf, and up until he saw it he was sure they had stepped into a trap.

Nub Baker seemed stunned, but the usually quiet Yantis spoke up. The rancher's face was red with fury and Lee guessed that it was Nick who had planned this trap, with witnesses and all. Yantis had figured his scheme would put both Lee Quirk and Dilly out of the way, and now that he had been outwitted, he showed himself in true character for the first time in Saddle Valley. His lips were drawn back from his teeth; his handsome face was one huge scowl, while his hand poised over his gun.

Lee Quirk, with his hand close to his own weapon, eyed the rancher with chill eyes. "I had a hunch somethin' was brewin' when I caught your men watchin' and followin' me, Yantis," he said. "And when I saw that heifer with my swallowfork, which I knew I'd never put there, I was on the lookout. Cattle stealin', as Nub said, is serious in this state."

The tickled Dilly let out another cackle, which was too much for Nub Baker, standing close to the oldish rancher. Nub, remembering that it was Dilly who had prevented his shooting Quirk in the fight at the waterhole, flared up in anger, and without warning crashed his granite fist into the middle of Dilly's horse-tail mustache. Dilly went back, hit the ground and then, bouncing up like a rubber ball, proceeded to swarm all over the foreman.

Baker's attack was the signal for the start of a fight. Yantis' two mounted cowboys went for their guns, yanking them from their holsters; but Lee Quirk's gun, slithering up from leather like a flash of light, barked before either man could pull trigger. A bullet smacked with terrific force against the bucking roll of the saddle of the nearest cowboy, and turmoil broke loose. The shocked but unhurt horse promptly got into the struggle, bogging his head and pitching madly; and, as a flying hoof bumped the horse of the other cowboy, it sent that bronc to bucking also. One shot came from the cowboy on the second horse, but it went wild.

Attached as the pair were to cow and calf, there was an immediate entanglement of ropes and bodies. Profanity, the bawls of frightened animals and a smother of sand from kicking hoofs, mingled in confusion. The two riders dropped their pistols in favor of making hasty efforts to escape the real danger of having an arm taken off in the snarl of ropes.

Lee Quirk meanwhile had kept his eyes on Nick Yantis, waiting for the rancher to draw. Instead Yantis raised his hand in the Indian peace sign, unwilling to risk getting into the combat. Lee had time to turn to help Bill Dilly who was engaged in a desperate combat with Nub Baker. Baker had drawn his gun and Bill Dilly had his hand gripping the big fellow's wrist, trying to keep the barrel of the weapon turned away from him.

Turning his back on Nick Yantis, Lee Quirk stepped in, waiting, as the bodies of the men twisted and turned, for an opportunity to bring down the gun on the foreman's head. He found an opening at last, in a smashing blow that sent the big foreman staggering, grunting. At the same moment, from behind Quirk Donna Cameron sent out a shrill warning.

Lee, glancing back over a shoulder, saw that Nick Yantis' gun was out and that the rider was in the act of throwing down on him. Lee knew that he could never turn and shoot in time to stop that shot.

As he swung, knowing he would be too late, there was a flash of move-

ment and Donna Comeron's blood-bay horse hurtled forward, heading straight for the big black that Yantis sat. A split second before the gun exploded, the blood-bay shouldered into the black mount. The bullet from Yantis' weapon passed close to Quirk's hat, and there was no second, for Yantis' high-spirited mount, catching the epidemic, also swallowed his tail and turned into a bawling mass of pitching fury. To keep his seat Yantis had to clutch his saddle horn, while his gun went sailing through the air.

Baker had not gone down, but he was too badly hit to raise his gun. Bill Dilly stood a few feet away, his own gun out now, covering the foreman. "Next time," Dilly snarled, "we'll figure that when you start a fist fight it allus ends in a gunfight anyway, and we'll just start with guns in the fu'st place."

Yantis' horse quieted, as did those of his two cowboys, allowing them to extricate themselves from their ropes. The fight was over—for the time being.

Lee Quirk said nothing, but he looked directly at Donna Cameron, sitting quietly on the snorting blood-bay. Lee was thinking back over events in the light of the swift action of the girl in saving him from almost certain death. He was remembering the evening at dusk when, at Arizona Bill's Great Wild West show, the girl had also spurred that same blood-bay horse forward, as he thought then, to ride Quirk down and save Buck Alder from arrest. A man has no eyes in the back of his head; it was possible that she might have been intending to ride down some ally of Alder's, to whom Alder had given a signal asking help. Might have? There was a sudden surge of strong belief in him. He knew.

Yantis made no effort to get his fallen gun. Through his teeth he gritted out an angry order. "Git on your horse, Nub, and le's ride. C'm'on, you blockheads," he called to the cowboys. Then he turned his horse and faced Donna Cameron.

"You have to take one side or another in this," he told the girl. "Just now it looked like you're against me, but I guess you only wanted to keep me from firing a gun and killing a man. I could say that you sided against me, but I'll just forget. Let's ride on, Donna."

The girl shook her head. "After this I ride alone," she said. "You brought me over to be a witness in what was a trap that might have sent two men to prison. And I was almost a witness to seeing a man shot in the back."

Yantis opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. "You'll think different about this later," he said harshly. "C'm'on, Willoughby," he addressed the tenderfoot who had been watching all the violence with bewilderment. "These ruckuses don't happen often, and I'm going to see that all chance for them ends. When a man's cattle are in danger of dying from thirst, he's got to fight." Followed by the glowering Baker and the two cowboys, Yantis rode up the ridge and out of sight.

Bill Dilly stared after them and looked at the girl and Quirk. There was something in their faces that he didn't understand; it seemed that there had been a sudden change in their attitude toward each other. Bill decided that he had business elsewhere, and, muttering some excuse, headed out into the valley, leaving Donna still sitting in her saddle, Lee on the ground holding his horse.

Donna smiled a little as Lee Quirk came toward her, leaving his mount with grounded reins. It was a queer little smile, tremulous, half afraid. And Lee, coming to a halt a few feet from her, looking directly into her eyes, found no words at all for a little while. But his face was aglow with a light that spoke eloquently. It made the girl tremble a little. She had

thought Lee Quirk grim and hard, but he wasn't.

She had her hands on the saddle horn, and Lee Quirk stepped up to put a brown hand a-top them.

"At the Wild West show, Donna," he asked hesitantly, "you were ridin' not at me, but at someone else?"

She nodded. "Someone with a knife. One of the crooks who had been following the show, a pal of this Alder who killed Cowboy Tom. The other man used to be in a side show, putting on a knife-throwing exhibition. Always carried a knife down the back of his neck in a scabbard, and he had his hand back when you followed Alder. It looked as if he were about to throw it at you. I guess Alder had passed him a signal. My horse, Chuckline here, scared him out of it and he slipped away."

Lee nodded. There was no question of doubting the girl's simple statements. "And when Alder happened to come to your room that night he covered you and Nan McGraw with a gun and you had to let him in?"

She nodded. "Yes, and he made us turn off the light. He was standing by the window covering you when you knocked, and during the time that you stood there talking. If you had tried to come in, he'd have shot you. You thought I was trying to shield him, but I had seen Alder only a few times around the show."

Lee's hand clamped down hard on the girl's warm ones. "I wanted to think that you weren't tryin' to help him," he confessed. "I figured it out that maybe he was a relative. God knows that there was a part of me that believed in you. My heart, Donna, knew you weren't the kind to help Alder, that you were as square and true as you looked, but my weak two-cylinder head told me wrong. I was a plain fool, a knothead. Couldn't you have given me a little hint that I was mistaken?"

Donna smiled gravely. "I believe the way you felt, it would have taken more than a hint."

"And anyway I guess you thought if I were so brainless as to believe that about you, you didn't care?"

"I did care. That is," she corrected herself hastily, "you were a neighbor of mine, and I like my neighbors to think well of me." The girl's eyes glinted with mischief and happiness. "I guess I'd better go back to the ranch now."

"I wonder," said Lee slowly, "if I could ride along, Miss Cameron? I'm not done apologizin', and I haven't thanked you for savin' me one, two, three times. I've got a lot to make up to you, if you'll only let me try. And I want respectfully on behalf of the Saddle Valley Chapter of the Ancient and Honorable Society of Rustlers, to persuade you to join us in saving our range."

"I think I wouldn't be so hard to persuade," she said softly, wondering how she could ever have thought Lee Quirk hard and grim. "And I remember that Nan McGraw has promised roast turkey with real cranberries for this evening. You'll stay to help us with the turkey?"

They both laughed, and then he swung up and they rode off, very, very slowly, as if they wanted that ride, their first one together, to last a long time.

CHAPTER VIII

The Range Spoilers Move

THROUGH the glory of a sunset reflected from high-piled, fleecy clouds the two rode, with an inner glory no less radiant than the one illuminating the valley. Forgotten for the moment were all the range and water conflicts of Saddle Valley, forgotten all suspicions and misunderstandings. Two people who had been brought together in a net of circumstances were seeing each other for the first time.

Donna Cameron knew that to be so

happy merely to be with someone meant that she surely must be under the influence of a spell, foolish, temporary. Yet she gloried in that foolishness, if that was the name for it. The hard little philosophy which she had learned during her travels with Arizona Bill's Great Wild West show and her contacts with the crew of men that followed the show, melted. Within her some small voice was giving warning that this Lee Quirk might be in reality a cattle thief, as Yantis claimed, and a bully trying to steal water and range to which others had equal claim, but she ignored it. Lee Quirk fought for his rights, but he fought fairly.

And by some miracle he loved her; his eyes betrayed it as a man's love is always betrayed to a woman. For the present that was sufficient. Some fate had flung them together, bringing them into the same small corner of the West, and the future was in the hands of the gods.

Regretful that their ride was over, they came into the yard of the Cameron ranch. The 4 Drag had seen a great change since the new owner had taken possession. The yard had been weeded and cleaned of rubbish, and a few clumps of cactus and bear grass transplanted. The corrals had been repaired and broken plaster on the walls of the adobe house replaced.

Jimmy Fairgether had ridden off that morning toward the Yantis ranch, to hunt horses of the 4 Drag small remuda, while Nan McGraw had stayed home to roast the wild turkey which Jimmy had shot the day before. Wearing an apron sprinkled with flour, the lady bronc-buster came out, to stare hard at the astonishing spectacle of two bitter enemies riding smilingly into the yard together. At her startled expression the two laughed outright, and Donna blushed a little.

"Why the armistice?" demanded Nan.

"It's a long story," said Donna as she dismounted. "There were some rustlers that turned out not to be rustlers and there was a fight and lots of excitement. Mr. Quirk is staying to help us with that turkey."

"Humph!" sniffed Mrs. McGraw. "Things sure do change fast in this Saddle Valley. I wonder why that dinged Jimmy don't show up. I told that boy to be sure to be home by sundown, which was when I was goin' to set that gobbler out on the table. I got the table all ready, white tablecloth and flowers, and you two better c'm'on eat it before I throw it out to the cats."

As she bustled about making final preparations for the meal, Nan McGraw kept up a monologue; she was both curious and a little miffed at the new turn in affairs.

"As my second husband used to say," she remarked as they sat down at the table, " 'Good bread, good meat; Good Lord, le's eat!' *Señor* Quirk, let's see what sort of job you can do carvin' on a turkey, and, Donna, let's hear about that fight and the rustlers that wasn't rustlers."

She listened while Donna explained, with help from Lee when she tried to slide over her part in knocking Yantis' horse aside at the critical moment.

"You youngsters act like you been to a picnic," said Nan McGraw disapprovingly. "That's what being young does for you, I guess," she sighed enviously. "Not havin' enough sense to think how you might be crippled up or even killed! And how about that terrible Gila monster of a feller who put up a boomerang corral over in Apache Canyon—what happened to him, hey?"

"I don't know what happened to the critter," said Donna smilingly, "unless he reformed and changed into a noble young man who's been trying to save this valley from being ruined by range hogs like the Four Drag and Nick Yantis."

"And I s'pose you're joinin' up with him?" demanded Mrs. McGraw. "Well, I don't know that you could do any worse than bein' with Yantis. That

sister of his is poison. And Nick he talks like butter would melt in his mouth; them's the most dangerous kind."

It had turned dark when they finished eating, ending with berries with cream from a cow that Jimmy Fairgether was keeping in the horse pasture. Nan McGraw went to the door to stand peering out into the night. "I'm worried about that boy," she said. "He ought to of been back back before this. I don't trust them two Yantis fellers we drove off the place the day we come. From what happened today, I'd say Saddle Valley is due for a war. Donna, you hadn't ought to go mixin' up in no man's war."

"Just what I think," said Lee promptly. "Why don't you two women go into town and stay until it's over? We'll help Jimmy Fairgether look after your ranch and cattle."

Donna shook her head. "No, I don't trade a room on my own ranch for one in a hotel. I came out here to get away from hotels. I'll live on this ranch come hell and high water."

"Which same brag could be wrote as the last words for a lot o' people sleepin' under headstones," said Nan caustically. "Listen! Horse comin'. That's Jimmy. I'll put the turkey back in the oven."

Donna and Lee Quirk went to the door, listening to the beat of the hoofs that came under the star-sprinkled sky. The rider was coming at a queer pace, first a steady beat of trotting hoofs, then a long pause, and then again the jog-trot.

Lee went out into the yard to meet the horse and rider, the latter being hunched far over his saddle horn, and weaving as he clung to the saddle with both hands. Hurrying forward, Lee received Jimmy Fairgether in his arms as the cowboy slid from the saddle, bloody and weak. While Lee carried him into the house and laid him on a bed, the two women prepared bandages and hot water. In his shoulder was an ugly-looking hole punched by a bullet. Blood was welling steadily from it.

"Yantis' outfit," he said weakly in explanation of the wound. "I was huntin' those horses when I run into a whole bunch of Yantis' cowboys. They had a big bunch of cattle, a herd they gathered on Table Mountain, drivin' 'em tonight to the Apache Canyon boomerang corral. Goin' to bust down that corral and burn it, they said. They was takin' some of your cows along, Donna, and they wanted me to go along to help in the fight. I told 'em I wasn't goin' anywhere until I got orders from you. When they tried to make me go along anyway, I spurred off. That red-headed fellow we drove off this place started shootin' after me, and the rest joined in. I made it away from 'em."

As he smiled wanly at Donna, the girl saw suddenly that this boy worshiped her, without hope of return; that he would cheerfully lay down his life for her. Tears came suddenly to her eyes.

"Yantis and Baker got a dozen or fifteen riders with 'em," Jimmy went on. "Said they were goin' to shoot up any ranchers that tried to stop 'em."

Lee Quirk looked down at the wounded rider. "We expected that—open war sooner or later. Their lawyer, Judge Mackilwait, tried to get a court injunction against my boomerang corral and failed. That left only open fightin' to them. And so they've got a dozen or fifteen men! A lot more than we thought, although Yantis has been hirin' a lot of new men. I've got to shove along for my boomerang corral. We've been keepin' two men there on guard every night, but I'll have to ride to turn out Bill Dilly, Courtney and the Budge brothers. Yantis and Baker will have their herd across the valley by mornin', and we'll be ready for 'em. It's a showdown at last."

"A showdown," agreed Donna, "whether the valley goes to Yantis or not. It's my fight, too, Lee. My val-

ley, too, by adoption. I loved it from the first glimpse I had of it. It was like an old home to which I had come back after a long absence. I want to help save it, Lee. We need a doctor for Jimmy; I'll ride with you part of my way to Caldera. And in town, I could see Sheriff Fortescue; maybe he can stop it."

Quirk nodded. "Sam ought to be told, but I doubt if he'll be able to block this fight. It would take a big posse for that. Yantis is desperate. But there's no need for you to join us, Donna. It'll be safer to stay neutral."

"I'd be a coward to stay out. I don't want to be neutral or safe. You men are right; I could see that Yantis' arguments were weak before, and now this shooting of Jimmy is the final straw."

They went to the corral, Lee to get his horse, Donna to saddle up a mount to replace Chuckline, and then they loped out together. For a few miles their route would be the same, then the girl would turn off toward town. They raced silently through the silver mist of the valley, to pull up finally at the fork in the trail.

"It's goin' to be a busy night for us," said Quirk. "We'd planned, if it came to a fight, to throw up some dirt banks in a sort of fort. This Yantis herd is from Table Mountain; that means they've had a long dry drive down to the valley and across it. If we can hold those cattle off for forty-eight hours, maybe less, Yantis will have to march 'em off to his headquarters for water. The water nearest to my tank is at Dilly's, and not enough there to water over fifty head. I'll go a little ways farther with you; ride down to warn Bill Dilly and send him on to turn out the others, while I get back to work with the two men now on guard."

"I can do that messenger work on my way to Caldera," Donna pointed out. "I'll stop by and tell Dilly, Courtney and the Budges. I want to be of some help, Lee."

He grinned at that and dismounted, to stand close by her horse. "All right," he agreed. "And you might tell the Budge brothers to bring up that pack-load of cartridges we bought to use in case of a battle. But outside of deliverin' those messages and tellin' Sheriff Fortescue, you stay out of this. I'm carin' too much to have you take any risk."

She looked down at him, her throat tightening a little with fear. It came to her suddenly that she might never see Lee Quirk again. As surely as a soldier going to war, this man was riding maybe to meet death. There would be a handful of men with him in the mouth of Apache Canyon, fighting for what meant life and death in the greater part of the West—water, range; fighting for a valley, her valley.

"You're not the only one that's caring, Lee," she told him, her voice breaking suddenly, "although I—I don't know why I should. Until a few hours ago you thought me a friend of a hold-up man and killer. But I do care, Lee; there's no use trying to hide it from myself or you. Surely the sheriff can do something to stop this trouble. I'd rather give up this valley than risk having anything happen to you. And yet no one but a coward would give it up without fighting, and I know you're not that."

"I can tell better about that when I'm under fire," he said lightly. "And if I hadn't been such a fool, I could've been talkin' with you, ridin' with you all the time since you've been here. And, Donna, you do care—a little?"

For answer she nodded and bent a little in the saddle. Standing on the ground, Lee Quirk was tall enough to take her in his arms, to hold her close as her lips lightly touched his, warm with the promise of the fervor they might give in the future. And then she was suddenly spurring her horse, racing south toward the dim, high crowns of the cottonwoods on Bill Dilly's ranch.

The music in her heart kept time to

the quick tempo of the drum of her hoofs. She was a fool, to be so moved by someone she had really known but a few hours, but she did not care. The pressure of his arms still seemed to linger when she flashed into Bill Dilly's ranchyard to find the old-timer standing in the door with a rifle in his hands. He had heard the sound of her horse in time to get up and dress.

Shouting the news to him after the style set by one horseback rider named Paul Revere, she sped on to the next ranch, the Courtney place, and finally to the Budge ranch where two brothers, Charlie and Lon, lived with their mother. There she repeated the instructions to bring the pack-load of cartridges. None of the ranchers asked questions; the brief report that Yantis was moving a herd of cattle toward the boomerang corral was enough.

Her messages delivered, she raced on to Caldera to summon a doctor for Jimmy and to notify Sheriff Fortescue, pushing the little pinto pony under her mercilessly. Back there was Lee Quirk, with a few rancher friends, waiting to give battle to save Saddle Valley from men who would despoil it!

CHAPTER IX

The Battle of Apache Canyon

IN the starlight a curious activity was revealed at the boomerang corral of Lee Quirk in Apache Canyon —men at the war-like business of throwing up a dirt embankment along the front of the big pool of water and outside the fence, which had wing extensions. At the back of the corral was a bare space of ground that needed little protection against men crossing it, and here they dug two trench-like, short ditches and low banks, which were connected by other trenches with the defense on the front.

Seven men were engaged in the job, using shovels and working fast against the coming of daylight and the small army of Nick Yantis and Nub Baker. Grave as was their situation, the seriousness did not enter into the talk they flung at each other. It takes more than war to make cowboys serious.

"If I'd knowed this scrap was goin' to mean work that couldn't be done from a horse's back," remarked Bill Dilly, "I'd of sold out my ranch to Nick long ago."

"What you need," said his neighbor, Clay Courtney, "is a special cowboy's shovel. One with a handle long enough to use from horseback, and a jigger on it to do all the work."

"Shut up, you old-timers!" put in one of the young Budge brothers. "And make them backs of yours creak some more. Be glad you ain't diggin' graves."

"I wouldn't kick at grave-diggin'," responded Dilly, "pervided I could pick the fellers to occupy them graves. I know a few birds what would make handsome corpses."

"Bill's idee of flowers is somethin' to put on the coffin of somebody he don't like," said Charlie Budge. "I got this section of trench done, General," he called to Quirk. "What next, Lee, and what you goin' to call this fort?"

"Fort Give-'Em-Hell," said Lee as he patted down the top of an earth wall and began to place rocks on it, leaving rifle slits between. "Ought to be thankful for the drouth; we won't need duckboards to keep our feet dry in these trenches.

They had worked fast, the five ranchers, a rider for Clay Courtney and one for Bill Dilly, seven in all, finding it easy shoveling in the water-soaked earth below the big tank of water. Up until the first sign of daylight they continued to toil, piling rocks on top the embankments, making deeper the trenches that connected the earthworks. The little ravine which carried overflow water from the tank they blocked with earth, leaving in it a piece of galvanized iron, which would serve as gate in case of emergency.

Lon Budge was busy making an

early breakfast, dropping slabs of meat in the deep hot grease of a Dutch oven, baking bread, boiling coffee. They had enough food to last them a week, and the pack-load of cartridges the Budge brothers had brought was enough to supply them for many days and nights of fighting. Their horses had been turned loose, except two which were left picketed in the brush along the canyon above, ready for emergency use. They were prepared for a siege. While Sheriff Fortescue might arrive, they had small hope that the sheriff could interfere effectually in the war. What people claimed was at least partly true; Sheriff Sam Fortescue was getting old, was losing his grip.

As the cheerful smell of the cook-fire smoke drifted into the air, they planned their fight. While ready to stand a long siege, they judged that the issue would be decided before two days. Yantis had made a mistake in bringing along a herd of cattle, particularly one from the summer range on Table Mountain. Those cattle would be needing water already.

As full day broke, the distant bawling of the animals came to their ears with the high-pitched yells of the riders. Leisurely they finished eating, rolled smokes and waited for the coming of the cattle over the hill. Two men, Yantis and his foreman, Baker, topped the herd in advance of the men on point. The pair at once saw the fresh heaps of earth around the tank, and knew instantly that the west-side ranchers had been warned of their coming. As the point men, followed by the leaders of the herd, came to the rim of the hill, Baker waved them back and shouted an order. The Yantis crew immediately came yipping up to turn the cattle down into a narrow little basin where two or three herders would be sufficient to hold them.

Then the whole group of riders, ten or twelve, appeared on the hill, to take a look-see at the corral and the small fortifications about it. After a long-distance inspection, they disappeared, evidently for a conference. There was a wait of half an hour and then a rider appeared again, waving a white handkerchief fastened to the end of a mesquite stick.

Bill Dilly waved a handkerchief from a rifle barrel in reply; evidently Yantis wanted a talk.

Promptly over the hill and up to the tank rode Nick Yantis and Nub Baker. Lee Quirk and Bill Dilly sat on top of an embankment, to act as spokesmen for the ranchers.

"Hyah, men," said Lee as Yantis and Baker stopped a few feet away. "Are you bringin' up more sleepers for me to brand? You can't expect me to do all your work for you, Nick."

Nick Yantis today was wearing two guns in half-breed holsters that showed the barrels of the weapons.

"We got twenty men," he growled. "You're asking for battle, but before we start it, I'm telling you what you're up against. You won't last ten minutes after we jump you."

"Difference in opinions is what makes poker games and horse races," said Lee lazily. "Right kind of you, Nick, to tell us you got twenty men. We got seven here, but we think we can hold your twenty back when you unchain 'em. Come in and have a hot cup of coffee."

Yantis snarled suddenly. Previously the rancher had let his foreman, Baker, take the initiative and do the talking, but now Yantis had stepped in, plainly asserting himself as boss and leader. Lee Quirk judged that he had twice the brains of Baker and was twice as dangerous.

"We'll burn that corral of yours, Quirk, and scatter the ashes over your grave," threatened Yantis. "We're giving you just this one last chance, savvy?"

"Thanks for that," said Quirk. "It was a waste of time for you to ride down, but it shows a noble heart. I never thought it was in you."

"Maybe you think the sheriff is go-

ing to help you out," snapped Yantis. "He won't."

"Why are you so sure of that?" asked Quirk curiously. "Seems it's his business to stop warfare."

Yantis grinned. "He won't be helping you in this matter," he repeated confidently. At the time Quirk gave the remark no particular significance, but later he recalled it.

As he sat his horse Nick was glancing about, looking over the earthworks the ranchers had thrown up and at the connecting trenches. Then without a further word Yantis and Baker turned and rode back over the hill. There was a long silence after that. The sun swinging up above the horizon beamed down to warm the crisp autumn air. Over the hill smoke made a black pillar for the blue sky. Yantis' men were cooking breakfast.

An hour dragged by and a couple more, without a sign of activity. Quirk might have guessed that Yantis and his riders had disappeared if they had not heard the bawling of the cattle herd. Nick might have sent for more men. He had said he had twenty, which seemed to the ranchers a pretty tall claim.

Watchfully they waited, smoking, joking back and forth, their rifles close to their sides, piles of cartridges handy. They had not yet emptied the two pack boxes in which the ammunition had been carried over mule-back by the Budge brothers, in the original packages in which it had been brought from the store where it had been purchased. Birds lazily winged their way down to the tank and drank. The sun climbed the peaceful turquoise sky.

Then it came, the first shot, without warning, singing its ominous message over their heads. The next instant the air was full of flying pellets, bullets that pecked at the earth wall, smacked into the rocks laid on top or sailed overhead. Rifles crashed from the hill in front, from little hillocks above the tank, from the slanting ridges by which the canyon walls slid into the valley. The hammering of the guns mounted to thunder.

"Whee-ew!" said Bill Dilly. "Yantis made a mistake. Twenty men, did he claim? Hell, they musta called out a company of militia."

The number of the guns stunned the ranchers. All the vantage places about the tank seemed to be full of riflemen. Yantis hadn't been exaggerating in claiming to have twenty men. The air literally swarmed with the metallic insects. If the ranchers so much as shoved out a rifle barrel, instantly bullets were hammering away at it. It was almost as much as a man's life was worth to try to snap a hasty shot. Bill Dilly, to test the accuracy of the shooting, stuck up his sombrero for a few seconds and immediately regretted it, for it was riddled by bullets.

"At that, Bill was smart for him," Lee Quirk hoorawed the old-timer. "He might of stuck up his head instead of his bonnet."

But there was no joking away the danger of the attack. As the guns boomed, Yantis' crew moved closer, crawling down on the tank from all points of the compass, taking advantage of all possible cover. Against this advance the ranchers sniped back hotly. At the back of the tank the Budge brothers were blocking any rush from coming down-canyon. Clay Courtney and his rider had the east, watching the ridge on that side.

Dilly, his rider and Quirk held the front, and it was here that the main brunt of the attack fell. Three groups of men were slowly moving down the hill. Two of these dug themselves in, but one disappeared entirely.

"They dropped into the ravine that leads up here," said Lee. "They must be crawlin' along it by now. I'm slippin' down to prepare a surprise party for 'em."

"Make it 'we're slippin' down!'" said Dilly as he followed Quirk.

They opened the gate of galvanized iron they had left in the earth bank which blocked the ravine bottom, and

crawled along between the narrow, trench-like walls, Quirk in the lead. Fifty feet up ahead they could hear the murmur of voices; evidently the half-dozen or so of Yantis' men who, Quirk guessed, had disappeared in the ravine, were now advancing along it.

Stopping, Quirk and Dilly squatted, grimly bringing up their rifles. The ravine here crooked about like a crawling snake. Without warning the party suddenly pushed around one of these loops, walking crouched over, carrying their rifles.

"Throw 'em up, you birds!" called Quirk, preferring to take prisoners rather than kill. He and Dilly already had their rifles to their shoulders, but the reckless pair leading the little party disregarded the command and snapped shots from their rifles without aiming. Quirk's and Dilly's guns were fired in one loud blast, and the two leaders of the raiding party, both struck, flung themselves back. In wild confusion the whole party retreated from sight and hastily continued to scramble back down the ravine, carrying one of the wounded pair with them.

"First blood," said Bill Dilly somberly. "I hated to do that, but it was either them or us." Dilly's leg was dripping blood from a bullet that had slashed through the flesh of his left calf. It had left a clean hole and after they had crawled back to rejoin the rest, the old-timer carelessly tied on a bandage over it.

Quirk discovered that during their absence Lon Budge had been hit also, by a bullet that had ripped along his arm. They doused the wound with disinfectant and bound it up.

The setback given the party in the ravine only increased the fury of the Yantis attack. Bullets flowed in unceasing streams from the guns, the noise they made at times mounting to a deafening thunder that seemed to shake the whole valley.

"Where'd Yantis ever git that army anyway?" grunted Bill Dilly, as the top of the earth wall in front of him jetted little spurts of dirt. "Looks like we can't expect no help from the sheriff. If he brung out anythin' short of a company of National Guard, Yantis would be able to chase 'em back to Caldera."

Although Dilly had been wounded in the leg, Lon Budge in an arm, they had been lucky so far. In addition to the pair Dilly and Quirk had met in the ravine bottom, at least two others of Yantis' crew had been hit hard.

"When it comes night," Dilly predicted, "it's bound to git hotter. We'll have to bunch up and wait for 'em to jump us. I'm runnin' out of shells; better distribute a few rounds from those pack boxes."

Charlie Budge went to the boxes he had tumbled on the ground on arrival that morning, the hoard of ammunition secretly ordered from the owner of a hardware store in Caldera, rifle and six-shooter cartridges to fit all their guns. Budge began tearing off the heavy brown paper that wrapped the parcels of cartridge boxes. A sudden exclamation came from him, and, swearing to himself, he tore open a box, examined it and then ripped open a dozen or so picked at random.

"Lee," he called in a voice suddenly tense, "there's hell to pay. These is all blanks, every last one of 'em. An' I know they were all right when we got 'em at the store. Some polecat got in where we had 'em cached in our stable and switched blanks for 'em, hopin' we wouldn't find it out until too late. That fellow, Rainey, who worked for us before goin' over to ride for Yantis, I'm suspectin' him. He might of known where we had them and arranged to get boxes of blanks to substitute."

Lee Quirk stood staring at the worthless cartridges. They had depended on that reserve supply of ammunition, needed it desperately now, were already running low. It meant the end for them—either surrender or a mass attack after dark.

"Somebody's got to go out and get

in some that ain't blanks," he decided. "And that'll be me. I'll be back before night; if I'm not, slip out of here, you men, and let 'em have the corral."

"But you sure ain't sneakin' out now by daylight?" growled Bill Dilly. "Don't be a fool, Lee. Nobody could do that, not even your grandpappy that used to play hide-and-seek among the Apaches. If somebody's got to try it, let a old man like me at it."

Lee Quirk slapped his neighbor's back. "You'd never make it. This takes somebody that's got enough sense to get scared—and to run accordingly. Cover me with your guns; I'm startin' off down the ravine. S'long, you fellows, and remember if I don't get back by dark, you high-tail it out of here."

CHAPTER X

Bullets and Flames

LEE QUIRK'S only chance to leave in daylight was by way of the ravine, crawling down it a few yards to a small side ditch, and then across to the brush of the ridge. Before he left he had hastily put clay from the water-hole bank over his clothes, plastering himself from head to foot, so that when he was forced to crawl through scant cover he would appear much like the earth about him.

Ready to cover him with their rifles should he be discovered, were Dilly, Charlie Budge and Courtney, all of them crouched watchfully behind the lower embankments.

As he moved along the ravine bottom Quirk was not half as concerned as his friends. Yantis' crew would not be expecting any of the beleaguered men to try to slip through their line in daylight, and usually what you aren't looking for you don't see. Fifty feet down the ravine he turned off into the small side ditch, and by it came to a clump of low mesquite. The mesquite straggled in a thin line to the thick brush at the foot of the canyon slope.

There had not been enough cover in the mesquite for Yantis' men to risk using it; it was dusty, scant and in places hardly sufficient to hide a gopher. Yet it was this route that Lee Quirk would have to use, with the risk of being picked off by some sharp-eyed rifleman every inch of the way. It took cold nerve to attempt it. Too much speed would draw the eyes of Yantis' men; proceeding too slowly meant more time for them to see him.

Nearly to the canyon slope, he came to an almost bare space, some twelve or fifteen feet long. Lee measured it swiftly and, waiting a lull in the shooting, slid along the scant cover. The sun was a dazzling white in the west, and Yantis' men, he knew, would be squinting against it. That was a help, but Lee held his breath as he inched along, a little tingling along his spine at the prospect of being stretched cold any second by a bullet.

A gun did send a shot that dropped a few yards from him. Lee hugged the earth, controlling a wild desire to get up and race the remaining distance, but knowing it would be plain suicide.

The shot had evidently been accidental, for no others followed. He slid on into a little clump of mesquite and from there made it safely into the thick stand of brush that blanketed the canyon slope. He had won. All he needed now was a little caution to get him safely to one of the two horses they had hidden. The guns kept up their booming behind him as he traveled up the ridge and to a big picketed hammer-headed buckskin that could take him to Caldera and back on a lope and hardly raise a sweat doing in.

Saddling, he climbed over the ridge into the next canyon and swung the buckskin down it to strike the Caldera trail below. With the thunder of the guns becoming fainter and finally dying altogether, he raced for the town, anxiously eying the sun that was dropping swiftly.

Ahead of him, as the trail dipped into a deep trench of an arroyo, he heard the beat of hoofs coming his

way. Drawing up, he slid his only weapon, his six-shooter, from its holster, anticipating one of Yantis' men returning from some errand in Caldera. Instead it was Donna Cameron, coming at a fast clip, now riding her blood-bay gelding, Chuckline.

The girl's face lighted at sight of Quirk. "It's over!" she exclaimed. "They've quit?"

"Not hardly," he said. "We run out o' cartridges. Some polecat switched blanks on us. I've got to get back before dark with fodder for our guns, or we're done. Two of the boys got hit, but not bad."

"It's not over then!" cried Donna. "You mean you've got to go back, Lee? I heard the firing when I returned to the ranch this morning. It sounded like Yantis had an awful lot of men, Lee. And there'll be no help from Caldera. I've got bad news. That Buck Alder you jailed twice escaped last night; got clean away. He had help from a small band of riders. Sheriff Fortescue put up a fight when the men rushed the jail, but they shot him down and took Alder with them."

"Sheriff Sam killed?" exclaimed Quirk.

"No; unconscious so far. He's got a slim chance to live. And the undersheriff, Tolan Piper—I hunted him up to report the attack on you and found him with Judge Mackilwait, Yantis' lawyer. That tenderfoot, Willoughby, and Flo Yantis were with them; seem to be in town looking after Yantis' interests. Piper refused to stir a finger. He said you men and Yantis had been itching to fight it out, and he was going to let you do it."

Quirk's face darkened. He remembered Yantis' remark that the sheriff would not be interfering in the battle. Undersheriff Tolan Piper had for several months showed a strong friendship for Yantis.

"Piper," the girl went on, "said that if you would come in and swear out a warrant, he'd see about doing something."

"Did he?" snapped Quirk. "He figured I wouldn't be able to get in. I could surprise him and swear out a warrant, but it would do no good. We're beggin' no help from the sheriff's office; this is a matter we've got to settle ourselves. How's Jimmy Fairgether doing at your place?"

"I took the doctor out this morning and he said Jimmy would be riding again in a month. Then I rode back to Caldera at noon to see if Fortescue maybe hadn't recovered enough to issue orders to Piper to take some action. He hadn't. Still unconscious."

"Tough on Sam," commented Quirk. "And so that Alder got away again? Bill Dilly was right; he should of been hanged instead of being put in jail. Wonder where those men came from that got him out?"

"You'll have to get back through Yantis' men," Donna was worrying. "Carrying ammunition, too. Maybe I can help, Lee. Shoot a few shots from the back and draw their attention."

Lee chuckled. "Sure, and draw shots your way, too. You ride on back to your ranch and wait. Don't worry about us. I just got an idea as I rode down—a way that might end the fight for the tank. Yantis has got his herd penned in the little basin southeast from the water-hole. If I can't get back in and maybe even if I can, I'll start a grass and brush fire between the tank and that basin. It won't destroy much range; there's a burned-over place back on the mountain to halt a fire sweepin' that way, and below Dilly and I plowed fire-guards. A fire would drive out Yantis' cattle and Yantis' crew with them. I'm full of ideas, some good, some bad. One of the bad ones is that you're not a real person, Donna Cameron, and that I'll wake up and find you're a dream."

He slipped an arm around her.

"Does it make me any more real to touch me?" laughed Donna.

"A little," he admitted. "You know, Donna, I've got a hunch that with you carin' for me, no bullet, except a silver

one maybe, could possibly hurt me."

"Don't you depend too much on that," she told him. "But if anything I could do would keep you from being hurt—praying, riding, fighting—I'd try it. You know that. I'd like to be riding alongside you when you try to get back to the tank. I know you wouldn't let me, but I'd like to."

He drew her close. "One kiss," he said, "and it will be just like you're ridin' along side me later. Now you go on home, Donna. I'll be ridin' in tomorrow to help finish that turkey. I've got to be on my way."

Again they separated, Quirk pounding toward Caldera and reaching it to ride by side streets to the back of the hardware store, which was owned by a man friendly to the west-side ranchers. Lee scraped the shelves clear of ammunition and dumped it in two sacks.

"Heard that there's a battle out at your Apache Canyon tank, Lee," said the hardware man. "Guess you know of Fortescue bein' shot. People asked Undersheriff Piper to lead out a posse to stop your war, but he won't. Plenty men would volunteer to help you boys if you said the word."

"I guess we can kill our own rats," said Quirk. "Why isn't Piper out chasin' the men that rescued Alder?"

"Piper took the trail of their horses and lost it out a ways. They split up but all took the general direction of north, headin' for the mountains."

It was something to chew on, that the hanger-on of a show like Arizona Bill's Great Wild West spectacle should have friends who would ride in and take him out of a little cowtown. Quirk wondered, but he had other things to think about. Hastily he went back to his horse and swung up, to cut back through alleys and back streets. Turning a corner sharply, he narrowly missed running over a man. It was Harvey Willoughby, who had just emerged from a restaurant in the Mexican quarter which served Below-the-Border style dishes. Willoughby's eyes fell to the heavy sacks on the front of the saddle.

"Taking out cartridges, eh?" he asked. The tenderfoot glanced back toward the restaurant. "You'd better quit that war, cowboy," he muttered. "There's nothing to be gained; take my advice and quit. Yantis has got too many gunmen for you."

Quirk looked at the man, for a moment puzzled by the Easterner's earnestness. He had never paid much attention to Willoughby, who, taking a mild interest in ranch life, rode out over the range with Nick Yantis and Flo. He was the sort you didn't notice, Willoughby, except to put him down for one of those rich playboys who frequently came West to rough it on ranches.

Someone else now came out of the restaurant, Flo Yantis. "Why aren't you out with your brave men, Quirk?" she sneered. "Well, you asked for war, didn't you? Now you've got it."

"So I did," said Quirk quietly, and with a final curious glance at Willoughby he spurred down the street and into the mesquite fringe of the valley. He would reach the waterhole about dusk, and as soon as darkness shut down he would slip in afoot, carrying his sacks of cartridges.

Spurring the big horse under him on the final stretch to the water tank, he nearly met disaster. A shot whirred by his head without warning, and another punched a hole in the peak of his sombrero. As he yanked his horse into the brush, the explanation of the shots flashed through his head. Part of the Yantis crew must have been on the lookout for him. Maybe one of them had seen his tracks, and had guessed that one of the tank defenders had slipped out and would be coming back again.

Coming out of one brush clump, he turned to head for the ridge behind the tank, but from ahead of him came another shot, this time fired by a better marksman. His horse leaped as if jabbed by a spur, and then, as more

rifles crashed, the buckskin went down to his knees.

Quirk landed, the sacks of cartridges in his hand, and promptly dived into a brush clump. He could not even stop to put a finishing shot into his struggling mount; the safety of six men depended on his escaping this ambush. As he sprinted into a little arroyo and down it, he could hear the yells of men who were riding to head him off on the south. If he turned back toward the mountain, he could easily be cut off there. His only chance was to hole up somewhere in this tangle of brush thickets and hide out until it got dark —which would not be long, as it was already dusk.

He caught sight of one rider topping the hill ahead, and fired once, missed, but came close enough to send the man scuttling for cover. Another horse and rider burst into sight, and this time he toppled the rider from his saddle, while the horse ran wildly into the brush. That made the other pursuers cautious and gave him time to make it to another arroyo. From the side still open to him, another horse was smashing through the brush, coming nearer. Quirk lifted his six-shooter but there came a call, different from the hoarse shouts of the Yantis crew.

"Lee!" No mistaking the owner of that voice. Donna Cameron riding toward him. She must have lingered in the neighborhood of tha tank, hoping that she might be of help if he ran into trouble.

Then he saw Chuckline gallop into sight, headed for the arroyo bottom. But the gelding's saddle was empty, although strangely enough the horse was coming straight toward Quirk for all that he lacked a rider. Lee's heart jumped. One of those wild shots must have hit the girl. And then, as the gelding swerved toward him, Lee guessed the answer; this was the horse Donna had used in her trick riding, and the animal had been trained to lope along whether his rider was on top, on the bottom or the side of him. The empty saddle was fooling the men of Yantis' crew who could see the horse until he dipped into the arroyo and pulled up by Lee's side. Donna swung off.

There was not much time to talk; the riders were closing in on them fast.

"You shouldn't have mixed in this," said Lee, "but you have. Remember my idea about settin' fire to the brush below the basin and the grass and brush alongside it? I'm goin' to do it, to make them drive their herd out of this part of the valley. Let me have your horse while you stay here hidden. Chuckline will take me out of here and draw them away from you. I'll race up and start my fires, and when you see the glow in the sky, you set the brush down here. And as soon as you do, head for that bare hill to the left; this brush will burn like a forest fire."

She nodded. Lee swung up into her saddle and went plunging madly through the brush, riding the fleet red bay on a zigzag path, taking advantage of brush clumps. Guns crashed again, and then the riflemen were left behind and Chuckline was flashing eastward as if to head for the 4 Drag Ranch. The pursuit lost ground steadily.

When the darkness had shut down, Lee angled back for a little flat of dead mesquite and weeds not far from the Yantis herd. He stopped here to set fire to tinder-dry weed clumps and Yuccas enclosed in palm-like sheaths. From the flat he knew the fire would race to a swale of tall, dead saccaton grass and move directly on the herd.

He could hear the alarmed yells of the men near the cattle, and then the thudding of hoofs toward him. He mounted again to sweep far north to the base of the mountain where thickets of drouth-killed brush, thistle and miscellaneous weeds, offered a willing path for flames. Again and again he stopped to set fires, until he had the entire wide front below the

mountain aflame. And again the horses came thudding after him.

He laughed and rode on into the darkness, knowing that the fire pushed by the wind would be sweeping down on the herd shortly, while the flames started by the girl below would close off the south. Hemmed in by mountains on the third side, the herd would stampede east, back toward the Yantis ranch.

The bawling of cattle came plainly to him as he stopped on a little hill. The cattle were in full flight, scared by the crackling of the advancing flames, and were lining out east, with Yantis' crew vainly trying to head them off.

Quirk chuckled and raced below to hunt Donna in the pall of smoke.

"Bet those cattle don't stop until they stick their noses into some of Yantis' own precious water," he remarked when he found her.

"You ought to be arrested for arson," she told him. "I'm ashamed to have Chuckline associate with so destructive a person."

He swung down, gaily lifted Donna back into her saddle, and with Chuckline carrying double, headed for the water-hole. Dilly and the others, who had guessed that Quirk had authorized the fires, came out jubilantly to greet them.

The attack was over. Maybe Yantis' crew would come back that night when they had the herd stopped, but the odds were against it. The fire would be a final blow. At least five men of the Yantis riders had been hit during the battle, one or two of them perhaps killed. A sorry defeat for the rancher and his small army.

The wounded Lon Budge was taken by Donna to her ranch to have his arm properly attended to and to rest there for the night. The others remained on guard at the tank.

For the time being Yantis was whipped, but with Undersheriff Piper in charge at Caldera, perhaps continuing in charge if Fortescue died, it was by no means the end. Yantis would merely try some other scheme, and keep on trying. He was playing for stakes too big to quit. If he won he would have all of Saddle Valley to sell as one ranch; if he lost, he would have cattle for which he had no range, the heavy expenses of his big crew, little or no chance to sell his outfit. Yantis had to fight or quit, and he was not the sort who quits.

CHAPTER XI

Long Engagements Are Bad Luck

A TRUCE held for a fews days in Saddle Valley, during which Quirk and his neighbors kept vigilant watch, both on the range and at the tank in Apache Canyon. In Caldera, Sheriff Sam Fortescue drifted out of his coma and made slow progress toward recovery. Meanwhile Undersheriff Piper still was head of the sheriff's office, and was plainly allied with Yantis.

Cattle in increasing numbers, driven by storm flurries, were drifting down from the mountains to the valley. Noting the poor condition of their herds, the west-side ranchers decided to cull another fourth for sale. Only strong stuff could live through the coming winter. Luckily their beef steers had been shipped when the range began to fail in late summer.

As the valley became more crowded with cattle, the crisis over range and water became more acute. It was a condition that could not last long; either Yantis, pressed for both grass and water, would have to ship out, admitting defeat, or he would have to force the smaller ranchers to let his stock water at their wells and tanks.

"We're all settin' with our feet in the oven and a stick of dynamite in the stove," Nan McGraw remarked. "Somethin' sure has got to bust soon, and when she does bust—*zowie!*"

Donna Cameron's 4 Drag Ranch became headquarters for the Quirk group as they maintained a patrol of the val-

ley, on watch for Yantis' next move. Nick's small army, as far as they could determine, had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared, and again there rode for Yantis just his regular ranch crew. No telling when that added force would come back for some new whirlwind attack; hence the ranchers kept to their saddles all day and half the night, dropping into the conveniently located 4 Drag house for meals, always finding pots and kettles with food and a pot of coffee on the back of the stove.

With the riders on patrol also rode Donna Cameron, a rifle in the scabbard under stirrup leathers, a six-shooter in a saddle holster. Riding with her neighbors, the old-timers, Dilly and Courtney, the young Budge brothers and Quirk, the girl felt happy because they had taken her in with them, as one of the defenders of Saddle Valley. She would have been much more happy if she had not occasionally seen, at a distance, Nick Yantis, his foreman and his men moving cattle, trying to locate them so they could find at least temporary water and grass.

As long as Yantis remained, Saddle Valley would be a battle ground. They all knew that, but joked about the trouble. She realized the jokes covered their knowledge of the real threat that Yantis held for them. And when she found herself alone with Lee Quirk there was no longer the unalloyed pleasure that she had experienced on her first ride with him. She loved him as she had then, more. Always there was the same sense of wonder that a woman could be so foolishly in love with a man, and a man with a girl. But mingled now with her joy were a dozen fears. One shot sent from ambush could bring that young, virile figure of Lee Quirk's from his saddle. And Yantis was the sort that would have that shot fired if he could hire a killer to do it.

No wonder she often brushed away tears and, unnoticed by Quirk, rode between him and suspicious thickets that might hide a dry-gulcher. Quirk on one such ride, returning to the 4 Drag after sunset, caught her weeping and scolded her gently.

"No good to borrow trouble before it comes," he said. "It's only payin' interest on a loan you haven't even made yet and may never get."

He drew up, dismounted, and suddenly swept her from the saddle, kissed the tears from her eyes. "I won't have you worryin'," he said, shaking her gently. "You go into town and wait until it's over. All right, then," as she opened her mouth to speak rebelliously, "I know you won't do it. But you listen to me, young one: I'm goin' to live to marry you, and we'll live to ride this country long after Nick Yantis has been put away in a six-foot hole. He's done for; forget him. You'll be queen of this valley, although we won't be hungerin' to own any more land than we got now. Live and let live; we've seen too much of one range hog to want to follow his example."

She nodded agreement. "I don't want to own any more of this valley than I do now. I don't have to have a deed to own something as beautiful as Saddle Valley. Just looking at it—that's enough ownership for me."

"That's my opinion on land, too," he said. "On land, but not on you. Just lookin' at you isn't enough." His lips pressed against hers, and for a moment the trouble in Saddle Valley was forgotten. But only for an instant.

"If it would only end soon," she whispered from within his arms. "I'm getting more afraid, the longer I wait. The longer it holds off, the more desperate it seems to me Yantis will get. And I have the idea that nothing is too desperate for him. Sometimes I think I'd rather be fighting such an open killer as Buck Alder."

"Yantis is *cultus malo*," agreed Quirk. "But settlement's got to come soon. A few more days and Sam Fortescue will be sittin' up and takin'

charge, kickin' out that Piper. It'll come soon, but when it does, we'll be ready."

And then, because it is not like youth to worry more than a few minutes at a time, Lee swung her up into her saddle, and she suddenly laughed and challenged him to a race. They came pounding into the ranchyard full tilt, yipped exuberantly, circled the house three times, and then, flinging their saddles off their horses at the corrals, finished with a foot race to the house.

There they found T-bone steaks waiting and Nan McGraw quarreling amiably with old Bill Dilly, while Jimmy Fairgether, still condemned to a wheelchair because of his gunshot wound, acted as umpire. Nan McGraw looked enviously at the two as they entered, flushed, smiling.

"Nothin' like a romance to take your mind off a war," she commented. "Every time you two come in together you look like a pair o' Columbuses that's just sighted land."

"We're going to be married, Nan," the girl said, "as soon as this trouble is over."

"Huh; that's liable to turn into one of these here long engagements," said Nan pessimistically. "And long engagements are bad luck. This war's gonna last ten years. Set up that pan of steaks to git hot, and open another can of peaches. Sounds like some more of our soldier boys comin' in."

Donna went into her room to change from her riding clothes, and while Nan McGraw stirred about in the pantry, Lee Quirk busied himself at the stove. The new arrivals clumped to the door and started to step inside. It was none of the rancher crowd but the undersheriff, Piper, and a man he had deputized.

"The majesty of the law, or as much majesty as kin go with a red nose," commented Nan McGraw sourly.

Piper, standing in the door, eyed them malevolently from small, red-rimmed eyes set in a bony frame of a face. "Got somethin' serious to say," he remarked as he looked at the people in the room. "And I'm sayin' it behind a gun." He had been standing with his hands behind his back; without warning one came around with a six-shooter. "I know, Lee Quirk, that you're handy with a gun, likewise Bill Dilly, so I'm takin' no chances with you. I've come to arrest you both. Nick Yantis has swore out a warrant for your arrest for cow-stealin'."

"Well, I knowed we'd be caught sometime," said Quirk. "They got plenty evidence against us I suppose?"

"Plenty is right," said Piper harshly. "You and Dilly was seen by Nick Yantis, Nub Baker and four of their riders burnin' your brand on two sleepers runnin' with Yantis' cows."

"Two, eh?" said Quirk. "Piper, we won't go; you know it's a stall to get us out of the valley. Yantis is at the end of his rope; is desperate. And what he does he's got to do right away, while he's got the sheriff's star on his side."

"They got the cows and calves in town for evidence," said Piper.

"You know we can make bail. We'll come in tomorrow and make it."

Piper shook his head. "You're goin' in tonight. Yantis and Baker is in town waitin' for me to bring you in. And you won't be able to make bail either for a while; the judge is out of town."

"So we'll have to lay a few days in jail while Yantis and the rest shove their cows over and take possession of out water tanks and wells and burn our corrals."

"It gives me a laugh," said Bill Dilly. "Arrestin' us on a two-bit rustlin' charge when we were jumped by a army at Apache tank, with Budge and me gittin' hit."

"I didn't come to argue about all that," said Piper. "Come along now. Step out."

"Not givin' us a chance even to eat supper?" asked Quirk as he stepped forward. He dropped an eye toward Jimmy Fairgether, who was sitting in his easy chair by the only lamp in the

room. Jimmy was a smart lad and would be ready to act. Neither Nan McGraw nor Donna Cameron was in the room; he and old Bill Dilly could afford to take a chance. On the other hand, maybe they couldn't afford not to; this might be a scheme to get them shot as they rode in as prisoners. The old dodge of killing a prisoner and claiming he had tried to escape was still in use occasionally. Piper and the deputy were standing just in front of the door, which was open. Piper had his gun in his hand, and the deputy had also drawn his weapon.

Then Quirk tried an old trick. He muttered something to Jimmy which Jimmy alone heard, and then bawled: "Look out, Piper! That lady bulldogger's behind you with a shotgun!"

Piper started a little, and then laughed. "Shucks, don't try to bluff me," he growled. Here Bill Dilly did his part by shoving a plate from the table. It crashed on the floor and Piper turned quickly in Dilly's direction yelling, "Don't try nothin'."

Then Jimmy Fairgether abruptly blew out the lamp and the room was plunged in darkness. Quirk leaped in just in time to jerk up the gun barrel of the startled undersheriff, pointing it to the ceiling, and then shoved against Piper and the deputy who were both light men.

Quirk and Piper went back through the open door and, stumbling over the stone door-step, fell in a heap, Quirk on top. For a few moments Piper and Quirk struggled in the moonlight on the ground. Piper was no match for Quirk and was disarmed, while Dilly meanwhile had prodded his gun into the ribs of the deputy.

It had taken but a few seconds. Donna, hurrying in, found Quirk and Dilly holding the officers prisoners.

"You got a smoke shed outside that's strong enough to hold 'em a few hours," said Quirk. "S'posin' you keep these till mornin' and then turn 'em loose."

"You can't do it!" roared Piper. "You'll pay for this. I'll send you up for ten years. The whole caboodle of you will go to jail, if you don't turn us loose."

"What are you going to do?" Donna asked Quirk.

"Why not ride along and see?" Quirk chuckled. "Bill and I, we sorta expected somethin' like this, since that sleeper trick they tried to pull a while back. And prepared for it. We need a few hours' time before bein' took to jail. C'm'on, Undersheriff, with your little playmate. Let's see if you have any pocket knives first. You might try to cut out through that plank door and cut your fingers."

"And I'm riding along with you?" asked Donna.

"Sure," grinned Quirk. "You're ridin' along. We need a good cowhand, and you're hired."

Knowing Lee Quirk, Donna knew that they were going on some wild venture, although it seemed from their attitude that he and Dilly were playing some huge joke. She wondered, but it made no difference; to be riding with Lee Quirk on a moonlight night in Saddle Valley was enough.

She liked Lee for the jaunty, youthful cheerfulness with which he faced danger and trouble. And yet, although he was the youngest of the leagued ranchers, all looked to him to be their leader.

THE entrance of Lee Quirk, Donna Cameron and Bill Dilly into Caldera just after daybreak the next morning was one that the cowtown would long remember. That part of the population not already up and stirring in the early fashion of small towns was soon awakened by a loud yipping, a thud of hoofs and the bawling of cows and calves.

A bunch of cowboys, who had been in town for an all-night celebration, hearing the excitement, hastily got their horses from hitch-racks and feed corrals to take part in the fun. What they found consisted of Lee Quirk, Bill Dilly and the girl owner of the

Four Drag hazing, with much noise, a little bunch of cows and calves along the quiet streets of the town. This harmless and innocent occupation appealing greatly to the cowboys, they volunteered to help, doing so with great zest, yipping and whooping, bombarding the sky with their six-shooters and racing their horses up and down the streets and over the sidewalks.

None of them knew what it was all about, but they were willing to help make a noise and to aid in penning the small bunch of cows and calves, not in the loading yards but in a vacant lot, two sides of which were closed by adobe walls, a third by a fence. On the open side, fronting a row of stores, a line of riders formed to guard the cattle.

Townsmen began gathering; the town marshal came on a run to quiet the disturbance, but found it beyond his powers. More cowboys got their horses and raced up and down the streets. More six-shooters exploded.

Among the men who came from the hotel, awakened by the uproar, were Nick Yantis, Baker, and three of their riders, all in town waiting to be witnesses against Quirk and Dilly. The group rushed across the street, staring hard, trying to figure out this commotion. Lee Quirk spurred his horse up to confront them.

"I understand you got warrants our for our arrest, Nick," he called, "for two calves that you claim you saw us brand when they really belonged to your cows."

"You're right about that," said Nick Yantis, glowering at Quirk and the hilarious crowd.

"We've come to town to give ourselves up, Nick," called Quirk. "But before we do anythin', how about lookin' at some cows and calves we got rounded up?"

Angrily Yantis and Nub Baker pushed their way through the crowd to look at the ten cows and calves held in the little space. Five cows belonged to Bill Dilly and five belonged to Lee Quirk, were wearing their brands; but all the calves, as they saw with sudden dismay, were obviously burned over from Dilly's and Quirk's brand into the Cross in a Box. And all the burned-over brands looked at least a few weeks old, maybe more. As they stared, a great roar of laughter came from the riders and from the citizens afoot. Men slapped the backs of the men nearest them and whooped. These men all liked and respected Lee Quirk; hated Nick Yantis. And here Lee had the goods on his enemy, in the shape of ten blotted brands.

"It's all a plant!" yelled Nick Yantis, and at that squawk the crowd's mirth redoubled. Of course it was a plant, anyone could see that. No rustler would brand a calf and let it run with its cow.

Then quiet fell. Lee Quirk was speaking. "Figured if there was to be any arrestin' to be done, we wouldn't be the only ones. It's mighty serious, Yantis, to bring false charges against your neighbors. We want you to sign a statement which says that the misbrandin' of the two cows and calves you're holdin' in town is only somethin' which might occur accidentally on the range, and that you won't prosecute."

"Damned if I do any such thing," said Yantis hoarsely.

"You'll be damned if you don't," Lee Quirk promised. "You've got a couple of your calves wearin' our brands, whereas we got ten calves of ours wearin' your brands."

Yantis turned to Baker, mumbling. Where was Undersheriff Piper? Quirk was making a farce of the whole affair.

"Furthermore," went on Quirk, "we can show the calves you brought in were branded a day or so ago. These calves, as anybody will testify, were branded quite a while back, maybe a month or two. So you can't say we done that blottin' to get even with you."

"I'll bet they ain't as old as they look. You musta used acid to make 'em look old," flared up Yantis.

"A wet blanket could produce the same effect," said Quirk. "But what about it, Nick? Of course we'll ask you to vent your brand on these calves and let us put on our own."

Yantis stood hesitating, his face a mask of fury. This smiling devil of a Quirk must have branded these to Yantis' brand soon after the other case of rustling they had tried to fasten on Quirk and Dilly. Not even Piper would have the nerve to make any arrest now.

"I'll call it off," said Yantis and turned to leave.

"Hold on," said Quirk, "we're askin' you to say before these witnesses that you withdraw your charges."

If hatred could have killed, Lee Quirk would have died where he stood. Yantis' hand itched to go for a gun, but it would be plain murder if he should happen to beat Lee to a gun, and he was very doubtful if he could.

He was licked, and he knew it. The town was against him, this whole country was against him. He looked out to Saddle Valley and cursed it. The valley and the drouth had been against him; the chances of closing the immensely profitable sale he had hoped to make of a big ranch to some sucker Easterner like Harvey Willoughby were slipping away. No fool, even one like Willoughby, would pay a fancy price for a ranch plainly overstocked to twice its capacity.

He mumbled that he withdrew charges, realizing that it would do no good to go on with his rustling charge now. Judge Mackilwait, the fat fool, was in bed; no good to consult him anyway. Yantis went to the hotel where his sister, Flo, had stayed during the night. Willoughby was also in Caldera and staying at the hotel. Matters had come to a crisis; Nick decided suddenly to bring the whole desperate situation to an end.

CHAPTER XII

Yantis Family Reunion

ON warm mornings the hotel people in Caldera served breakfast in the patio to such guests as cared to eat there. This morning, although the calendar was well into the fall, was sunny, pleasant, and Flo Yantis was sitting at one of the gaily painted Mexican tables. The early uproar in the town had not disturbed that self-possessed young lady; she had just gotten up and now sat looking over a magazine as she sipped her coffee.

Her brother, Nick, came scowling into the patio and dropped into a chair at the table.

"Coffee, Nick?" she asked. "Still a cup left in my pot. Help yourself. I don't believe in waiting on brothers."

Nick swore. "I need something stronger than coffee," he growled and from a flask he took from a pocket he poured a stiff drink into a glass. "And so do you," he went on after he had flung it down his throat. "We got to work fast, and you got to do most of the work. I've done my damnedest; been licked. We have to pull out of this country, and *pronto*. We'll take with us what we can, which amounts to just what you can get out of Willoughby."

Flo's eyes turned suddenly hard and bright. "You mean drop a loop on him now? That might not be easy; he's turned a little coy lately, both on marrying me and on buying the ranch. Maybe he's scared of this trouble you've been having over water and range. Even a Easterner can smell something wrong with a ranch deal like you're trying to put over on him."

"I could of put it over if it hadn't been for that Quirk," said Yantis. "I had it rigged up with Piper to get Quirk and Dilly out of the way last night, have them stuck in jail, and instead Quirk turned up with ten of their cows owning calves branded with my Box Cross."

Flo Yantis' eyes were thoughtful.

"Quirk licked you again, did he? You know I could spend my life cooking in a little ranch shack for that cowboy—almost. I got more bad news for you, Nick. Buck is back."

"What?" Yantis exploded. "After we got him out, he had the nerve to come back? What does he want now?"

"What does out dear brother always want?" she returned. "Spondulicks. Mazuma. *Dinero.* You ought to know, Nick."

"I got no money to give him, not a cussed cent. And he can't hurt us by threatening to drop a letter to Willoughby telling who we are. We're getting out of here anyway. Where is he?"

"In your room," she told him. "Sleeping. Sneaked in during the excitement in town. I had to take him in some breakfast."

Nick continued to swear under his breath, no one else being at the tables in the patio to hear. The rancher suddenly shot out his hand, gripped Flo Yantis' wrist. "It's up to you," he said hoarsely. "We stayed here too long. I got a hunch there's detectives around here ready to close in. Work fast, Flo; hook him quick, I don't care how. Just get him to make a down payment on the ranch, say ten thousand cash. I'll offer it so cheap he can't refuse. Play him with your eyes, promise to marry him today, if he buys the ranch. We've gone in the hole over the whole business; anything we can save is to the good. Then by staying as his wife, you can dig into him for a lot more and finish up with a divorce. His family won't want a scandal."

"Some burden for little Flo," sneered the girl. "Leaving it all to me—after you failed."

Brother and sister understood each other. They did not work together because of affection, but because so far they had made a profitable team. They were a hard pair, as hard as their brother who went under the name Alder, a petty crook living by his wits, and occasionally pulling such hold-ups as had resulted in the death of Cowboy Tom. The two in fact accounted Buck Alder a weakling. The schemes that Flo and Nick Yantis pulled were much more ambitious.

"It's up to you," Nick repeated. "I'll make the offer to him; you close the deal. Is he up yet?"

"No. I'm waiting for him out here. He slept through all the noise. But I heard him stirring around; he ought to be out soon."

Nick nodded, had another drink. "We got to make it quick," he said. "This deal's taken too long; we may be in hot water if we stay a day longer than we have to. The sooner I'm out of it the better."

"How about leaving your little Four Drag girl friend?"

Nick frowned at that. "Maybe," he said, "I won't leave her. She's in town. Might take her up to the hide-out."

"Kidnaping is even more serious than train and bank robbing."

"Nothing is serious when we got a hole-up place and a gang of fighters like ours. Once she was up there, she'd—"

He broke off abruptly. The door of a room cross the court had opened and the Easterner, Willoughby, came out, freshly shaved, dressed in his costume of cowboy boots, vivid shirt and huge black velour sombrero.

"Just in time for breakfast with you, eh?" said the Easterner. "You folks here in the West get up so deuced early. What was all the excitement about this morning?"

"Just some wild cowboys celebrating," said Flo Yantis as the Easterner sat down, yawning. "I've got to go to my room; be right back."

"Just as glad Flo quit us," said Nick as Flo disappeared. "I had some business to talk over with you, Willoughby."

"Business this early in the morning?" protested the tenderfoot.

"It's sort of important," said Nick briskly. "I've got to go to the Coast, on business. Now we've been talking

ranch deal for quite a while. You know how many cattle I've got. This range and water trouble is working out all right; and for a quick deal, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll just cut in half the figure I gave you on it, on condition you wire for ten thousand cash to close the deal and have it here today or tomorrow. Think of it—a two-hundred-thousand-dollar ranch for half price, on condition you get the ten thousand here in a hurry."

Willoughby frowned. "I don't know, Nick," he said. "This is a little too fast for me. My lawyers, of course, will have to examine the leases and abstracts first. And I don't want to buy myself into a hard-boiled range war. I'm no Billy the Kid, you know."

Nick waved his hand carelessly. "That's easy. You can soon clean that up. Sell off a few cattle until the next rain comes along and buy again. And I'll tell you what to do to get rid of Quirk and the rest; get your lawyers to organize the Saddle Valley Cattle Company, and offer these hick ranchers a lot of fancy salaries if they put their ranches into the company."

"I don't know," said Willoughby uncertainly. "But why are you rushing off, Nick? When you figure on going?"

Nick did not answer. He was looking at the open door of a room across the court, where Flo Yantis stood motioning to him from behind Willoughby's back. Behind her, Nick could see his brother, Alder.

"Excuse me a minute," said Nick, frowning at being interrupted. That Buck must be raising trouble again. He crossed to enter the room and, slamming the door behind him, glared at Buck. The brothers stood eying each other, Nick frowning, while Buck grinned. Flo was in a rage, her hands clenched in fists, a tigerish glint in her eyes.

"We been played for suckers!" she flung out. "That man out there, the polecat, he—"

"Take it easy," said Buck. "It's a laugh. You always thought you were the smart guys in our family and you fell for that."

"Fell for what?" growled Nick Yantis.

Buck slapped a hand down on his leg and shook with derisive laughter. "That tenderfoot sucker," he said, "that you were going to saw off a cow ranch on at a fancy price, why I just happened to recognize him as a detective. He is employed as special officer by a railroad. His real name is Charlton, and while he's not specially bright, he was smart enough to put it over on you two. Living along with you and pretending to be a knothead while he probably listened to many a talk you had with Nub Baker and that wild gang of yours about banks and trains you robbed! Maybe even knowin' where your hole-up place is located."

Nick's jaw set rigidly. "You sure about that?" he asked.

"Sure. I had him spotted to me once when I was in a bunch passing counterfeit bills. Couldn't forget his map. He was s'posed then to be one of these here English remittance men. What a joke!"

Nick Yantis evidently didn't consider it a joke. His hand dropped to the single gun he was wearing, while his other hand clamped on the door knob.

"Going to kill him where he sits," he muttered. "No, I'll call to him first. 'Hello, Charlton,' I'll say and then let him have it. Damn him, I'll teach him to play with me."

But Buck Alder leaped across the room to grab Nick's wrist. "Hold it," he said. "Don't be a fool. He must have men in this town, ready to help him corral your whole gang. Play him along and slip outa here. Chances are he doesn't know where your hide-out is and is hoping to find out before he moves."

Flo also put herself between Nick and the door. "Buck's right, for once in his life. We got no chance to win anything here; the money you made as

payment for your land and cattle is gone. Let's bring him in here and tie him up. Then we'll get the rest of the boys and ride up where we can lay low for a while. They can have Saddle Valley. Nick, don't shoot him; someone will hear the shot and investigate."

"Plenty of shooting in town," snarled Nick.

"Yes, but not here in the hotel. Nick, calm down. You're as dumb as Buck, getting into trouble here over a killing."

Nick cooled down. "Bring him in, but I'm claiming the pleasure of knocking him out before we tie him up."

Flo Yantis stepped to the door, opened it. "Oh, Harve," she called to Willoughby, "come in a minute, will you?"

Flo was smiling, with not a sign to hint that she had discovered that her Eastern playboy was a detective. Suspecting nothing, Willoughby got up, and crossed the patio.

As he stepped inside the door, Nick, standing behind it, struck hard with his pistol—the butt, not the barrel. Willoughby's knees jack-knifed and he went down heavily.

"Ought to of killed him," growled Nick. "We'll tie him up, gag him and wrap his head in a blanket. Then we'll lock the door and tell the maid not to come into this room until we get back. That will give us most of the day to get a start. We'll change to fresh horses at the Box Cross, kiss the place good-by and be in our hide-out place tomorrow night."

"I think I'll be riding with you," remarked Buck, "if I can get out of town without being seen. I got a set of whiskers to wear. I never liked this town; next time they git their paws on me, it'll be a rope for me 'stead of a jail. Only I'd like to kill that damn cowboy of a Quirk before I go."

"Wouldn't I like to myself?" said Nick Yantis. "But I got something better than thinking about killing a man. I'm taking along something that's alive, as part pay for my work here—that Four Drag girl. We got all our horses down at the Mexican's corral. It's a quiet place, and once we get her down there, we could ride out of town with her. She's here in the hotel. I saw her come in a while ago and take a room."

"How you getting her to the corral?"

"Easy. I'll have word sent her that Bill Dilly is in trouble down at a corral, got kicked by a horse, and they want her to look after him. I know a Mexican boy that's slick enough to make it sound convincing and her horse is tied out front. She won't stop to look for Quirk. Mex boy will say the message is from Quirk.

"Get moving! Buck, put on your whiskers, and slip down the alley to that corral. Wait there for me. I'll get Nub Baker and warn the rest we're riding."

"So you're really taking that girl," she said. "I always hated that ex-circus girl rider. Hate her even enough to enjoy what's going to happen to her in your gentle hands, Nick. And at the same time it will be a sweet revenge on that Lee Quirk. He thinks the sun and stars rise and set in her. Sawing off a couple of his legs wouldn't hurt him more than stealing his girl. Only he's liable to take your trail and keep it, Nick."

"And that," said Nick, "if he comes breaking into our hole-up country, will sure be a break—for me."

CHAPTER XIII

In the Feed Corral

LEE QUIRK had breakfasted on a double order of ham and eggs at Cowboy Tom's café, eating with cowboy friends who were still chuckling over the entrance of those ten cows and calves. Bill Dilly had disappeared. Lee guessed that Bill was off in some saloon, celebrating the victory in liquor of fitting strength.

Leaving the restaurant, Quirk paid a short visit at the home of the dan-

gerously wounded Sheriff Fortescue, and then returned to the feed corral where he had put up his horse, Skylark. Mounting, he jogged off for the hotel to meet Donna Cameron. The girl, weary, dusty from the night ride, had gone there for a civilized bath and a short nap before riding back to the 4 Drag with Lee and Billy Dilly.

The hotel man told Quirk that Miss Cameron had just stepped out. Ridden away, rather, after a Mexican youth had brought some message. Seemed in a hurry, too.

Something at once made Lee uneasy. He had been whistling a minute before, thinking of the heaven that Saddle Valley would become after this war was ended and boomerang corrals taken down and Donna Cameron became Mrs. Lee Quirk. Now some vague presentiment of trouble hovered over the morning.

There was, however, nothing to do but wait for Donna to return. Restless, Lee stepped into the patio of the hotel, the same one where he and Bill Dilly had chased Buck Alder one night. The patio, deserted for the moment, looked attractive with its grass and little shrubs still green. And the gay Mexican tables looked inviting. He and Donna would want a little place like this at their home. Only it would be open, on the side looking out over Saddle Valley.

Gazing at that picture, he was brought back to the patio by a peculiar thumping on one of the chamber doors as if someone, unable to get out, were kicking it. Lee walked toward the door, and as he got closer heard a muffled voice.

It was enough to justify him in rattling on the door. Finding it locked, he promptly kicked at it with his booted foot. The hotel locks, he knew, were locks by courtesy only; this one broke at the first kick. The door opened on a heavy figure that lay on the floor, a man bound and with his head wrapped in a blanket.

Lee bent down and, taking off the blanket, revealed the face of Harvey Willoughby.

Willoughby must have had a hard skull; the detective had recovered consciousness to worm his way to the door and thud on it with his feet.

"Git 'em," said Willoughby hoarsely as Quirk yanked the gag from his mouth. "Yantis and his crowd. I'm no tenderfoot. Thought I was a detective. Been here trying to get the goods on a bunch of train and bank bandits that's been operating all over the country. Yantis led 'em. He sprung a new game in Saddle Valley, trying to play tenderfeet for suckers. His brother is that Buck Alder who killed the restaurant man."

"All that sounds reasonable, now you mention it," said Quirk.

"It's true. Their tying and leaving me here means they're hiking out for their hole-up place somewhere up North. Don't let 'em get away, Quirk. Once they escape, an army couldn't pull 'em out. Regular outlaw post with a big gang of men. That's where the crew come from that got Buck Alder outa jail; later Yantis brought 'em over to help jump you fellows at the waterholes."

"We won't let 'em git away," said Quirk as he sawed with his knife on the ropes that bound Willoughby. "A lot o' cowboys in town will turn out for the chase." And then something came to his mind; the sudden disappearance of Donna Cameron, following some unknown messenger. The suspicion that came to him made him forget the detective. It would be like Nick Yantis to try to take the girl with him.

Leaving the detective sputtering, Lee, throwing down his knife so the man could finish freeing himself, raced through the hotel lobby and flung himself into his saddle. Yantis and his riders, as Quirk knew, always kept their horses in the Mendez corral when in Caldera; the first thing to do was to ride to the Mendez place to find out if their horses had gone.

His horse drumming the street at a gallop, he raced for the corral which lay a little distance from the center of town. On the way he saw one cowboy riding along the street. Pulling up, he shouted to the man to bring a half-dozen riders to the Mendez corral, *muy pronto.* The man nodded and Quirk dashed on, not realizing that the cowboy was only half-awake after a riotous drunken night. Lee's words made absolutely no impression on him; the cowboy merely waved his hand, thinking Lee had shouted him a greeting, and headed for a saloon, to swallow a little hair off the dog that had bitten him.

The gate to the Mendez corral was partly open and all was seemingly quiet inside the high adobe walls as Quirk pulled up. With the gate invitingly open and no stir within, Lee unhesitatingly rode inside, to find himself covered by three guns. There were three men and two women in the corral, Nub Baker, the Yantis brothers, Flo Yantis and, standing near Nick Yantis, Donna Cameron.

Nub Baker stepped behind Lee to shut the board gate, while Nick Yantis grinned. They had heard the rapid beat of hoofs, had opened the gate as an invitation for the rider to enter. Quirk, who had checked his horse, was sitting his saddle staring at them. The third man he knew to be Buck Alder—according to the detective, Nick's brother; the false beard that covered the man's face was no disguise to Lee.

Beside the five mounts of the party, there were two cows in the corral and four colts, all belonging to Mendez.

"Ride right on into our parlor," sneered Yantis. "We're glad to have somebody else ride along with us, for a little ways anyhow. Take his gun, Nub, and if he makes a move, shoot him in the liver. And besides that," threatened Yantis, "my first shot will be at Miss Cameron." He shifted his gun to cover the girl.

For a moment Quirk had considered trying for his gun, to start enough fight here to bring help for Donna at least. That hope was gone now in the face of Yantis' threat.

Quirk's gun was taken from its holster, and Nub pushed him from the saddle. As he stood on the ground, Lee's eyes met the girl's. Donna seemed altogether unafraid, confident, yet inwardly she was trembling. The girl knew as well as Quirk what they intended to do with their new prisoner. A few miles from town their guns would dump Quirk from the saddle and his bullet-riddled body would be left hidden in some mesquite clump.

"This *is* luck," purred Yantis. "We better be moving. Remember, Quirk, if we happen to meet anybody riding out of town and you so much as wink an eye, it means bullets for you."

Quirk nodded coolly, covering the despair that overwhelmed him. He had never before been in a situation where there was not some glimmer of hope, but he saw none here. They were in a town filled with friends, cowboys who would charge hell with a tin cup of water, but for all the help that could be expected, he and Donna might as well be in the middle of a desert.

Desperately he cast about for some means of escape, but there were only the high, solid walls of the corral. Near him, close to the gate, was a manger for feeding hay, made from concrete and topped by a two-by-six inch plank. This was the only available cover inside the corral.

Flo Yantis stepped to the side of her horse, which stood near Quirk. The stockman's saddle she was using today carried a holster with a buttoned-down flap. Reaching out one hand, Flo unbuttoned the flap, revealing a small, pearl-handled gun. Quirk took a sudden deep breath, and glanced swiftly about him.

Skylark, Quirk's mount, left to shift for himself, had moved up with the intention of nipping one of the bunched Box Cross cow-ponies. Yantis had lowered his gun and Nub Baker was jerking around the head of the big

horse he rode, preparing to mount. Quirk glanced again at the concrete manger and made a desperate decision, figuring out a line of action as coolly as a player plans moves on the chess board.

Unnoticed, he nudged Skylark unexpectedly in that ticklish sector adjacent to the stifle joint, and the horse plunged forward, indignant and startled, shoving Nub Baker's big mount against that of Buck Alder. Donna's spirited Chuckline, jolted in turn, squealed and raised his heels for a backward kick.

A frantic stampede at once started; the two milk cows in the corral bawled and galloped amid racing colts in a mad circle within the walls. One saddled horse began to pitch, sending his empty stirrups swinging high. A cloud of dust swirled up. The colts crashed against the wooden gate, came close to breaking it down, and rebounded to start a wild charge. And as he had hoped, in all this confusion Quirk had his chance. Yantis had jumped aside to keep from being stepped on by the colts, and for a moment Donna was separated from the rancher by Nub Baker's big mount.

Quirk flashed forward, seized Donna, half shoved, half flung her toward the manger.

"Duck into it," he ordered. "And stay ducked."

As Donna was diving behind the concrete shelter, Lee was leaping toward Flo Yantis' horse, to make a swift grab for the pearl-handled gun in the saddle holster. A gun roared and a lead slug, sailing past him, made a pit in a wall of the corral; but Quirk, the small weapon in his hand, was following Donna into the manger, landing sprawled in its bottom.

Cursing heatedly, driving the horses from that end of the corral, the three men stood with leveled guns, firing wildly at the concrete manger. A few splintered the two-by-six plank on top of the wall.

Quirk and Donna, squatted on a carpet of alfalfa leaves and stems in the narrow space of the manger, snatched a look at each other and smiled. It was a little humorous, this refuge they had taken.

Quirk examined the little pearl-handled weapon in his hand and grunted skeptically at the caliber. The five cartridges in it and the concrete manger were all that stood between them and the enemy. Nor could they count on help from the town; the shots would arouse no special curiosity since a sporadic popping of guns had been going on since early morning.

"Git him!" Nick Yantis was yelling. "Step on up there and finish him, Nub."

"S'posin' you do the gittin'," returned Nub Baker. "He's got Flo's gun. You or Buck step up and pull him out by the tail and nail his hide to the fence."

"Not me," said Buck Alder. "I tried to git that fella twice and didn't. You two try it this time."

"Nub, climb up on your horse," ordered Nick. "Shoot down into that manger. A bullet hittin' in there will ricochet off the concrete walls and fetch 'em out. I don't care which one you hit. They're both wildcats."

Nub Baker, gun in his hand, started to mount his big horse. Quirk was waiting for him. By taking advantage of the tiny crack between the two-by-six and the concrete part of the manger, Lee could watch the burly foreman as he raised himself in a saddle stirrup.

And then, as the man balanced there for a moment, Quirk raised swiftly and fired Flo Yantis' little gun. Buck let out a yelp and hit the ground.

"Got me in the arm!" he bellowed.

"That popgun of Flo's couldn't hurt nobody," yelled Nick.

"If that bird had a bean-shooter, he'd be dangerous," growled Nub. "Hell, we ain't got no time to fool here. Either git him out or let's git goin' and leave 'em behind."

"Sure, leave 'em behind, and have that Quirk leadin' a posse after us," returned Yantis. "We got to git 'em first."

Again their guns crashed. Splinters from the plank showered down on the two besieged. Quirk glanced at Donna.

"Stalemate so far," he said encouragingly. "And as long as it's that, we win. If we could only give the alarm."

"Wish we could start a fire again like you did out at Apache Canyon," remarked the girl. "But there's nothing in this corral to burn."

"Jiminy!" exclaimed Quirk. "You got it! On the other side of this wall is the corral of Pablo Hernandez, who always has a stack of loose hay and straw that he hauls in from his farm down the valley. Tie up some of this hay in the bottom, strike a match and toss it over the wall. That straw and hay will burn like it's soaked with kerosene."

She nodded and set to work while he tossed her his matches and, with the fancy-handled little gun, kept watch through the crack between the manger and plank. He could take only hasty glimpses; the shots were striking all along the plank.

Donna, kneeling on the manger bottom, jerked off her neckerchief and used it to make a bundle of the dry alfalfa leaves and coarse stalks. She struck a match and, as the bundle flamed up, tossed it over the wall behind them.

Outside the three men, not understanding this maneuver, again emptied their guns. Flo's voice sounded shrilly, urging them to finish it. Above the woman's tirade, Quirk could hear the crackle of flames on the other side of the wall. Smoke drifted into the air and the crackling sounds increased in volume. Someone from the Mendez house shouted in Spanish.

Flo Yantis sprang into her saddle. "Me, I'm riding," she announced crisply. And flinging back, "Take care of yourselves, boys," she stooped to pull open the corral gate and dashed through.

The three men still hesitated. A dark pillar of smoke floated into the air from behind the wall. More people were coming. Down the street a cowboy yipped. There would be a flock of riders up to see the fire.

"Let's go!" howled Nick Yantis suddenly. "To hell with Quirk. Let him try following us. We can beat his bunch to the Box Cross and get fresh mounts to ride North."

As the three men rushed for their horses, the colts crossed to the manger, crowded up against it. Quirk suddenly arose behind them. Donna was no longer in danger and, not having to think of her safety, he could try to stop the flight of the three.

Above the backs of the colts Quirk saw Buck Alder who, with nothing to be gained now in wearing a disguise, had shed his beard. The man was just mounting his horse, rising into his saddle. Catching sight of Quirk, Alder gave a surprised yelp and raised his gun. The weapon exploded, but the shot was fired by reflex action. Already the slayer of Cowboy Tom was toppling from the saddle, with a shot from Flo Yantis' small gun in him. Traveling but a short distance, the small-calibered bullet, sent to a vital spot, had all the lethal effect of a cannon. Alder was dead before he struck the ground.

Nick Yantis, bent low over the saddle, headed toward the gate. The colts had left the manger now and were all trying to get through the gate. They blocked Yantis' horse momentarily, gave Quirk time to leap across the few feet of ground and under the neck of Yantis' mount.

Yantis fired one wild shot, and then Quirk, with one swift movement, had gripped the wrist of Yantis' gunhand, had jerked the man from the saddle. In turn, Yantis made a wild grab for Quirk and clutched the short barrel of Flo's pistol.

So locked, the two struggled, face to face, while Nub Baker, on his horse, frantically circled, trying to get in a shot.

Swiftly Quirk pivoted, maneuvered always so that Yantis' body was between him and Nub's gun. Hoofs were

beating toward the corral, and until the riders arrived he had only to hold Yantis as a shield. Without the threat of Nub, Quirk could have twisted loose and shot the rancher; as it was Yantis was more useful alive. For straining seconds the pair struggled, Yantis trying to jerk his gun loose, Quirk satisfied merely to keep his hold on the desperate man. Vainly Nub Baker brandished his gun and circled in the dust raised by the milling horses, trying for a shot.

Once Baker rode alongside the manger, forgetting the girl in it in his excitement. Over Yantis' shoulder Quirk caught a blurred glimpse of Donna rising from behind the big foreman. He called a protest, but she paid no attention. In her hand was some object which Lee was unable to identify. Then, unseen by Nub, the unknown object in Donna's hand rose high and descended suddenly, striking back of and below the foreman's head. As if hit by lightning the big fellow collapsed, fell from his saddle and lay still.

Nub disposed of, Quirk twisted Yantis' gun away, just as Bill Dilly and half a dozen cowboys swept into the corral. Dismounting, they crowded in, to grab and disarm Yantis and to tie him. Then, in rapid succession, they removed Buck Alder's body and took out Yantis and Nub Baker, who had been brought back to consciousness. The detective had appeared to claim Yantis and Baker as his prisoners, but the cowboys, realizing that the law had been cheated of hanging Buck Alder, were demanding that the pair be hanged in his place.

During this loud-voiced altercation in the street, Quirk and Donna were left in the corral. For some reason Donna had remained standing in the manger.

"Are you all right?" Lee asked anxiously as he went over.

"I'm all right," she told him. "And the war's all over. Boomerang corrals and all."

"That boomerang idea could be used for other things than a boomerang corral," Quirk said. "A kiss for instance. You see it curves over like this and it comes right back," as he drew her to him. "All same as a boomerang, only it isn't thrown."

She slipped out of his arms, laughing suddenly. "Someone might come in at the gate any second," she protested.

"All right," he said. "The boomerang kiss is an idea that will keep. Say, Donna, one thing puzzles me. What did you use to slam that Nub Baker on the conk? There wasn't anythin' the shape of a club in the manger that I saw. Did you bite off a chunk of concrete?"

Donna smiled, and blushed suddenly. "I had to use something and I couldn't find anything else," she confessed. "So I took off a boot."

"Your boot?" he gasped. "You didn't say boot?"

"Yes, and it's lying over there in the dirt. Pick it up for me, will you, Lee? I delivered to Mr. Nub Baker what I believe is called a rabbit blow. Like you kill a rabbit by hitting the back of his neck with the edge of your hand. Only I used the heel of my boot. It—it seemed to work."

Still incredulous, Quirk looked down and saw one small, stockinged foot.

"I'll say it worked!" he exclaimed. "Lady, you'll never catch me talkin' back to you, when you can do that with just a boot. With Nan McGraw puttin' the kibosh on those two Yantis punchers with a stick of wood, and you knockin' out Nub Baker with a boot, the women of Saddle Valley sure don't need protection. It's the men that need it."

"You hush," Donna blushing furiously, scolded him. "And bring me my boot this instant."

Instead he laughed and lifted her up out of the manger and cradled her in his arms. "I think we ought to frame that boot and hang it in our house somewhere," he said teasingly.

Her clothing was covered with wisps of hay and in her dark hair were stems and leaves. All these but seemed to make her prettier, if anything, and

recklessly indifferent to the danger of someone coming through the gate, Lee kissed her again and again.

Boots clumped just outside the gate, "Hey, Lee," came Bill Dilly's voice querulously, "why don'tcha come out and see the excitement? They finally took those two birds off to jail 'stead o' hangin' 'em. The boys want to buy you some drinks in celebration. C'm'on out!

"What's holdin' you, anyway?" bellowed Bill Dilly as he appeared, mustachios and all, in the corral.

Lee grinned. One of Donna's arms was tight about his neck.

"Well, Bill," he said, "take a look. What would *you* say was holdin' me?"

Adam Forepaugh

IT is interesting to remember that one of the early characters of great interest in the West was not a Westerner and never saw the West until he toured it at the head of a circus parade.

This character was Adam Forepaugh, a native Philadelphian, a circus, wild-animal and live-stock magnate. Forepaugh was interested in the West and was of interest to the Westerners for two big commercial reasons—horses and wild animals.

The West was full of expert judges of horseflesh, and yet any old-time Westerner will readily admit that the greatest judge of general horseflesh ever to exist was "that Philadelphia hombre," Adam Forepaugh. Incidentally Forepaugh's horse market in Philadelphia was for many years the largest and best horse market in the world.

Forepaugh bought horses for the United States Government and all the greater foreign powers. He bought horses for all the big circuses, liverymen, race-track magnates, and big commercial corporations. He was, for a long time, the biggest importer of Arabians, Belgians, Percherons, English Coach horses, saddle mounts, Shetlands and even Spanish donkeys.

He became a showman and developed an interest in buffalo, bears, deer, antelope, elephants, lions, tigers, snakes and other foreign and domestic wild animals, in the natural course of a lucrative business as a producer.

Forced to take over a small circus for debt, Adam Forepaugh specialized in handsome and especially well trained horses and other animals, and built up a show that was second only to that operated by the historic Barnum & Bailey. The show, after many years, was combined with others, and Adam Forepaugh found himself a power in the circus world. Because some of his best pet horseflesh was traveling with the show, Adam Forepaugh spent several summers traveling with it, too.

It is said in the West that any man who loves horses is himself a lovable character, and old Adam Forepaugh was just that. A story is told of him that betrays his soft heart. While his circus was playing in San Francisco he heard that Tong wars had put the historic Chinese Theater in financial straits.

"How many horses do they use?" inquired Adam Forepaugh.

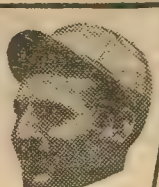
"They don't use no horses a-tall," replied his auditor. "It's a Chink highbinder outfit."

"Well, it can't be much of a show if they don't use horses," observed Adam Forepaugh; "but if they need money, I guess we can't let 'em go on the rocks."

So Adam Forepaugh sent his favorite nephew to take over the Chinese Theater and to spend enough money to put the historic institution back on its feet.

"I NEVER HAD SUCH A SMOOTH SHAVE"

says PEPPER MARTIN praising Probak



DEAR PEPPER MARTIN: Your good word for Probak is appreciated. And now we'd like to tell you about Probak Junior, the marvelous new double-edge razor blade that combines shaving comfort with an extremely low price. Think of it! 25 keen, smooth-shaving blades, uniform in quality, for only 59¢. Probak Junior is automatically tempered, honed and stropped to produce a shaving edge that removes even the toughest beard swiftly, cleanly and with perfect comfort.

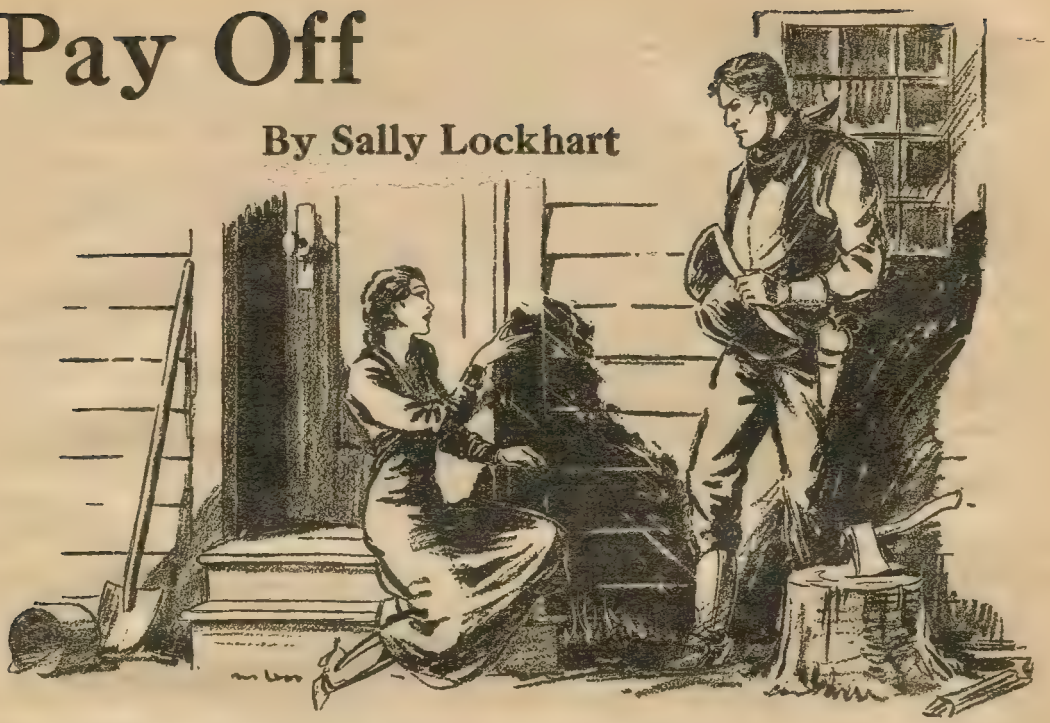
Probak Junior is a product of Gillette and fits all Gillette and Probak razors.

NOW! PROBAK JUNIOR 25 BLADES FOR 59¢

Also trial package of 4 blades for 10c at your dealer

Pay Off

By Sally Lockhart



What chance had Lynn, a lone girl, againt wolves? And Fate had played her a cruel trick, filling her heart with love, when it should hold nothing but hate for this new enemy.

LYNN MEADOWS rested the long-nosed rifle on the topmost pole of the old crisscross fence, and peered, tense and listening, through the dark shadows cast by a high-riding moon. This was the likeliest place for an intruder to appear, here where the fence which marked the eastern boundary of the T O Ranch approached most closely the road from town.

"Though of course," Lynn told herself with a hopeless gesture of slim shoulders, "someone could slip past me easy through the three miles of fence that I can't guard."

It was late now, long past midnight. Small chance that anyone would come tonight. But the dread she always felt of going back alone to the empty ranch house held her where she was. It was back there at the house she had had her first encounter, two weeks ago, when, out for an innocent evening stroll, she had returned to find a burly ruffian crouched upon her door-step.

The man had worn a deputy's star, although Lynn didn't know him. That, itself, was strange—she'd grown her twenty years right here on the T O Ranch, and knew everyone for miles around. Still, at his demand, she'd let him in. He hadn't named his business right away. In fact, he never had—for when he'd started getting far too friendly, Lynn had taken one of her father's forty-fives from where it hung in its holster on the wall, and shot him through the shoulder. She'd had to, when he wouldn't be bluffed.

The next day, she had a quite expected visit from the sheriff, Hilary Rand. She had figured Rand would like nothing better than to arrest her, for Lynn had always been certain it was Rand who was at the bottom of all her troubles.

A year before it was, when Hilary Rand had ridden in to Las Piedras Valley, and had come out here to see her father. He'd offered to buy Lem Meadows out, but he had come a month

too late. Only a few short weeks before, Lem and Lynn and her brother, Alf, would have been eager to take up any offer Rand might have made. With their cattle mortgaged to the hilt, and the dead line for the payment of delinquent taxes just ahead, they hadn't known where their next meal was coming from.

But then Alf Meadows, herding cattle, had stumbled on some likely looking rock, had sent a sample to an assayer down in Denver, and had had a fine report. They'd kept it quiet, wanting to be dead sure it wasn't just a pocket or a pinched-out vein, and doing what work was done themselves. But Lynn was sure, although Rand had never mentioned ore, that in some way he knew about it, and that it was the ore that he was after.

When they'd refused to sell, Rand had tried to force them every way he could. And now, in the one short year since Hilary Rand had first appeared, five hundred head of T O cattle had died from drinking poisoned water, a grass fire had destroyed a hundred acres of winter range, and the land itself had been forfeited to pay the cattle mortgage and delinquent taxes—all, that is, except the little piece up here where the ranch house was, and the vein of gold Alf had found.

In this year, Lem Meadows had been killed when a bunch of steers had mysteriously stampeded and Lem had tried to save them. And Lynn's brother was in jail. A Mexican, in Las Piedras, had forced a fight, and Alf, to save his life, had had to shoot the fellow dead.

They gave Alf twenty years at Canyon City. Deep in her heart, Lynn felt that Rand was at the bottom of it all, though, when she mentioned that to anyone, they said "sour grapes," thinking, of course, it was on account of Alf she hated Rand. For in the meantime Rand had grown very popular in the town and with the ranchers round about. And when the old man who had been sheriff in Las Piedras Valley for fifteen years had passed on, Rand had been elected to that office, almost unanimously.

Anyway, Lynn had been surprised when Rand missed his chance to have her put in jail, after she shot that deputy. But when, two nights after that, another deputy—again a man she'd never seen before—rode up to her door, along about dusk, she shot again. She had warned the fellow, that time, not to leave his horse. She'd gotten the rifle when she'd seen him coming, and when he'd started to climb down, she'd let him have a bullet in his leg.

Since then, each night Lynn had patrolled the fence with her ready rifle. If Rand wanted her and came by daylight to arrest her, she would submit; but she had determined to repulse, even if it came to a serious shooting, any prowler, officer or not, who came by night.

She sighed a little now, for she was very tired. This wasn't an easy game that she was bucking, and more than once discouragement had almost overwhelmed her. "There'll be no one coming now so late," she told herself again, "and I don't believe there'll be anyone, either, at the house. Lynn, you ninny, you march straight home and go to bed."

It was then she heard the smallest crackling sound, a few yards distant in the brush, beyond the fence. She held her breath and, straining to see, could just make out, in a pool of shadow cast by the thickly needled branches of a giant pine, the tall, broad-shouldered figure of a man—young, she knew by the easy graceful swing of hips and shoulders. He was making a big gray horse fast to a clump of juniper.

"Quiet, Rex, I won't be long," she heard him murmur, his cheek against the beast's soft nose. She liked the deeply resonant quality of his voice, even while the instinctive chill of danger ran in little prickles down her spine.

She leaned her weight against the

fence, steadying the rifle on the rail. Her knees, inside the batwing chaps she wore, were trembling, and she had to force her hands to steadiness on the rifle butt.

The man had turned. A beam of moonlight whitened for a moment gaunt cheeks above a square, determined chin, and the mouth, with an odd little grimace tugging at its corners, was kind, Lynn thought. She liked that face instinctively; there was a strange disturbance in her chest beneath the masculine flannel shirt which she wore. It was a thing she tried to quell, and couldn't.

Then a vagrant moonbeam caught and danced for just a moment on one gleaming star point of the officer's badge the young man wore upon his flapping vest front. Instantly, Lynn froze. "Another of Rand's deputies," she ground between clenched teeth. He was coming toward the fence. Cautiously, too. That proved, if nothing else, that his errand here was not an honest one.

Lynn spoke in a soft but oddly husky voice: "Stop, stranger, where you are. You can turn around and board that nag of yours, and head on back to where you came from, but if you come another step in this direction you'll get a carcass full of lead."

The fellow stopped short in his tracks, peering through the shadow at Lynn's dim figure. Lynn heard his muttered curse, but right on the heels of that, he laughed, a little short, sharp laugh between his teeth. Then suddenly, so swiftly Lynn's eye could hardly follow, he ducked and came plunging forward in a stooping run, close to the ground, his own gun leaping from its holster as he ran.

Automatically, Lynn crooked her finger on the trigger. The rifle spewed a long red streak of flame, but even in the darkness which seemed to swoop in after that brief flash of light, Lynn knew her shot had missed. The gun's high rest, together with her own short stature, had left an area of comparative safety close to the ground, between the intruder and the fence. He had seen it instantly, taken the chance. Even with Lynn's expert aim swung downward toward him as he ran, the bullet had cleared his stooping figure by the fraction of an inch.

When Lynn could see again, after the rifle's blinding flare, the man was lunging through an opening in the fence. And she saw in one quick glance that he had clubbed the drawn gun in his hand.

There wasn't time to aim and fire again. As the man reared suddenly upright, a foot away, and she saw the gun butt rise and fall in one swift motion, Lynn did a little ducking on her own account, and ran, tight fear clutching at her breast. There was something different about this man from the two who'd come before. He wouldn't be bluffed, and she was sure that he had meant to knock her out. There'd been cruel force behind the blow which had only grazed her shoulder.

Now a little bleat of terror escaped Lynn's panting lips, as she ran, dodging, through the woods. The man was following, guided by the sound of breaking brush and the scuff of her running feet. Dodge as she would, she could not throw him off her track, and he was closing in on her, she knew by the sounds of his pursuit.

As she broke into a little moonlit clearing, still a good five hundred yards away from the refuge of the house, she shot one swift look backward and saw him, scarcely twenty feet behind. She knew then she would never make it. With a savage, half-sobbing little cry of rage, she spun on one booted heel, trying to bring the rifle up to line against the breast of her pursuer.

Too late. The man had already closed the gap between them. His iron grasp clamped on Lynn's slight shoulders and brought her whirling to the ground, his six feet of sturdy bone and muscle atop her meager hundred pounds.

Instantly, though, his hands relaxed

a little. Gazing up with grim defiance into the face of the man above her, Lynn saw surprise and perhaps a little shame flicker across his mobile lips, as if he had not realized till now how very small his adversary was, and how unequal that made the struggle. He eased his weight a bit, and the gun butt he had been about to raise, hung for a second motionless in his hand.

That second's grace was all Lynn wanted. Her limp form whipped to instant life, and she buried her white teeth savagely in her assailant's wrist, the one that held the gun, rendering it helpless. With her finger-nails, she clawed his cheeks, his neck, his eyes.

He was fighting back, the best he could. The grip of his left hand, fastened to her shoulder, still pinned her to the ground as he tried to wrench his gun hand free from the strong grip of her teeth. She had the advantage, though, and presently, forced to clear his vision from the trickling blood her nails had started, he had to spare the hand which held her to the ground. With one pouncing motion, swift as a striking trout will rise to seize a flitting willow fly, she had wrenched the sixgun from his fist, reversed its muzzle and trained it against his breast.

The fellow swore aloud, and then with a laugh that seemed to mock at his own helplessness ground out: "All right, then, have it over. Shoot! As big a doggone chump as I am ought to die."

Lynn didn't pull the trigger. She'd fully meant to, when she'd seized the gun. Had meant to kill him. Now, she couldn't shoot. She didn't know just why; for surely, ruffian that he was, he well deserved it.

He'd drawn back a little, but had not risen. Their faces still were scarcely a foot apart. And now, as some swaying branch above removed its shadow from Lynn's upturned features, a strange choked sound spilled from his throat. And then Lynn heard him whisper: "Holy cats, if it ain't a girl!"

He scrambled quickly to his feet. "Why, ma'am," he stammered, "ma'am, I sure apologize. Those chaps, that broad-brimmed hat—and anyhow, I wasn't—"

But Lynn waited to hear no more. Like one of the shifting shadows which played about the clearing, she was up and off, running with all the speed that she could muster toward the refuge of the house.

She heard the young man's quick and startled imprecation from behind her, but this time, she knew, he wasn't following. She gained the house, safe for the time at least, bolted the doors behind her, and fastened the window bars.

She sat down, panting. And now, in place of fear, a strange, sick disappointment was welling in her. In that tall, gaunt-cheeked young man out yonder, she had recognized—she could not deny it, though she really tried—some true affinity. Deep within her heart, she felt the tugging of some tie which would have drawn her irresistibly, had he been anything other than what he was, a tool of Rand's.

Slow tears coursed down her cheeks. "What's the use?" she asked herself, with the first real weakening of grim purpose she had felt in this long and tragic year. "With the whole world turned against me, what can I do?"

BUT in the morning, Lynn was feeling better. All the old stiff purpose had returned. And the next night saw her in the woods, patrolling the fence again, her rifle on her arm. Rand couldn't bluff her, she told herself repeatedly. He couldn't wear her down with these hirelings he was sending out, whatever his game might be. He'd have to come out in the open, finally; lay down his cards.

And for all his popularity in the town, it seemed he didn't dare arrest her. He was taking it out in talk, so she had heard, telling folks she was

crazy, touched by the misfortunes that had befallen her; getting more credit for himself by being magnanimous.

She didn't know, tonight, just where to keep her vigil, but finally hid among some brush not far from the spot where the stranger had appeared the night before. It was really about the only place where a man on horseback could force his way through brush and fallen timber to reach the fence, unless, of course, he took the lane which led through the T O gate and up to the house itself. However, men of the stripe that she was bucking did not take to open places, Lynn assured herself.

She hadn't slept the night before, and Lynn was very weary. The air, for all its autumn chill, felt pleasant to her feverish skin, and the needles where she crouched made a soft and aromatic bed. Lynn slept, she didn't know how long. But she wakened suddenly to the sound of stealthy footsteps beyond the bushes where she lay. Scrambling to her knees, she peered between the sheltering branches.

A giant hand seemed to squeeze and drain the blood from her furiously beating heart. She hadn't known, till now, how desperately she had hoped he would not come again—this tall, slim-hipped young man who had created such turmoil in her heart.

But there he was, striding across a moonlit clearing between the trees, determination in his step, for all its lightness. She had hoped that he had felt, last night, something of the thing she had, herself; hoped he would tell his master, Rand—she didn't for one moment doubt that Rand had sent him here—that he was through with such a sneaking business. His surprise last night had been genuine enough, she felt, when he had learned it was a girl whom he'd encountered, and she had thought that knowledge might keep him from coming here again. But there he unmistakably was—tall and graceful, gaunt cheeks making little pools of shadow between high cheek-bones and square, determined chin. There was something hard about his mouth tonight, though; it was grimmer than it had been before.

"I've got to shoot in earnest, this time. Got to," Lynn told herself, as she brought the rifle slowly into line with the chest of the approaching man. "I've got to keep on teaching these scoundrels their lesson, till they understand I won't be bluffed."

But before she got the weapon into place, a strange thing happened. The tall young stranger had frozen suddenly in his tracks, his gaze fixed on the bushes some ten feet distant from where Lynn was. And he was going for his gun. But even before the roar of an exploding bullet filled Lynn's ears, and flame burst like a fiery bubble from the bushes where the stranger's gaze was fixed, she saw him falling. As he fell, his own gun spat a brilliant dart into the brush, but when he hit the ground, he lay quite motionless and limp, and didn't even stir when a second bullet, lancing from the brush, found its mark in his still form.

A scream had risen in Lynn's throat, but died, still born, against stiff lips. She tried to rise. She had to go out there to where that stranger lay, and help him. But her knees refused her weight and buckled under her.

Horrified, she stared into the clearing; silent, now, with a grim and breathless hush which seemed to speak of death. Then through the silence came the sound of breaking brush, and of a man's feet running—running away.

Lynn's eyes were wide and staring, her whirling brain could produce no explanation of this thing which had taken place before her eyes, out there in the moonlight. "Oh, God," she cried within her, "couldn't you have spared me this one thing?"

Then, surprisingly, she saw the man sit up. He had his bandanna off, was pressing it hard against the dark spot which had spread on his white shirt, above the ribs. But he wasn't mor-

tally hurt, that much seemed clear, for he was cursing softly to himself.

Thankfulness filled Lynn's soul. Then, strangely enough, but such is human nature, all of the cold suspicion and resentment she had felt against the man came flooding back. She couldn't guess what the meaning of that ambush was, but anyhow he'd had enough. He'd trouble her no more tonight. He was making off, crawling on hands and knees toward the spot where Lynn could now make out the long, inquisitive nose of the gray horse he had forked the night before.

As he neared the place from which his unseen enemy had fired, Lynn saw him stop and curse again, as he lifted something which, evidently, his knee had struck. It was a gun, she thought, for she saw him thrust it in his belt, as he went his way again. She wondered if that chance shot of his into the brush had proven so accurate as to send the weapon spinning from his adversary's hand. Yet hadn't his adversary shot again after that? But the notion was lost, at once, among the crowding driftwood of other thoughts which were swirling through her mind.

With the disrupted night world calm and quiet again, and moonlit peace thralling the woods, she made her way back to the house, and sought a restless pillow.

"What next?" she wondered wearily, and for the second time felt her resolution weakening—the promise she had made herself to hold this remnant of the T O Ranch, with its vein of precious ore, against all odds. What chance had she, a lone girl, against these wolves? And now this element of mystery creeping in to confuse and baffle her. Not to speak of the cruel trick Fate had played, filling with love a heart which should hold nothing but hate for this new enemy.

BUT though Lynn pondered through the long and sleepless night on just what turn events might take, and told herself she'd be surprised at nothing, the sight of the stranger riding his gray horse boldly up the lane, next morning, turned her limbs to water under her.

The doors and windows were still barred, however, and at last she forced herself to get the rifle, and, crouched beneath a window-sill, where she could not be seen, watched the man's approach.

He was handsomer, she thought, than she'd imagined in the moonlight. His blue, far-seeing gaze had a straight and honest quality, and the wide mouth was truly gentle, in spite of the determination she could read in the tight-bunched little mounds of muscle at its corners.

His cheeks seemed pale, Lynn thought, beneath their overlaying coat of tan, and he rode a little sidewise, as if to spare the ribs beneath the bloody patch which still showed, darkened now, on his shirt front.

A little cry of pity stirred her lips, but she stifled that, telling herself that his arrival boded her no good, that she must be alert, prepared for any move which he might make. The deputy's star, she noticed, though, was gone from his flapping vest front.

He rode straight toward the house and halted, less than a dozen feet beyond the door. "Hello," he called. "Hello, the house."

Lynn wished there was not that quality in his voice which stirred her so. She raised the rifle barrel along the sill, and the morning sunlight flashed a warning from it.

The stranger saw it. Lynn knew he did. Still, he didn't flinch. "Hey, you in there," he called. "Come out. I got a little matter I'd like to speak about."

Lynn made no answer. She wanted to, and yet she did not dare. And then the young man played a reckless card. "Look here," he shouted, "watch me close, and if I look suspicious to you, you can shoot. I'm goin' to loosen this here belt of mine, and let my Colt gun drop. You'll have to take my word,

I reckon, that I ain't got any other weapons hid about my person. . . . Ready? Watch!"

Slowly, he let his hands slide to his belt, jerked loose the buckle and, as the gun belt fell, flashed both hands up above his head. His eyes were cool, and his lips were smiling, but Lynn saw the little mist which gathered on his forehead, as he watched the window where the rifle barrel glinted in the sun.

Surely, Lynn told herself, she could do no less than match his courage with her own. Slowly, she rose and walked a bit unsteadily to the door, unlatched it, and walked out.

She wore a dress this morning—a dress of soft blue wool which seemed to have caught the color from her eyes. Quick crimson stained her smooth cheeks, now, as she read the instant admiration in his gaze. She had to fight back the sudden pounding in her throat, and force her voice to steadiness, as she said: "Well, if I've played the fool, fallen into some trap that you've set, let's have it over. Seems like I can't hold out a whole lot longer, anyhow."

The young man touched his hat. "With your permission, ma'am, I'll just bring my flippers down where they belong. Got a sort of busted rib that's none too comfortable. My name's Tone Murdock," he went on, "a stranger in these parts, until—until I bought a meal, and in the course of payin' for it, came up here and met you, sort of accidental-like.

"Somehow, ma'am, I don't know how it is, but I had to come up here this mornin' and get acquainted better. Your folks at home? Or would you just as leave tell me the story your own self? I mean what's happenin' here, and all your troubles. That's what I want to know."

Lynn never knew just how it was, or what had happened to her. She hated bitterly the thing that she was doing, but suddenly she crumpled on the step, and burst out crying.

Tone Murdock got down off his horse. She heard him. She knew she ought to run, but instead just sat there, blubbering. He sat beside her. "There now, don't cry," he soothed. "And if you could, ma'am, sort of hurry up and tell me what I asked—well, time, you see, might be important."

That whipped Lynn upright. "I can't believe," she told him, half surprised at the words which seemed to tumble out, "that I really have a friend, at last, but I'm going to gamble on it." And then she told him the whole story of how they'd been so nearly on the rocks, and the vein of gold that Alf had stumbled on, and about the coming of Hilary Rand. She was sure that there was honest sympathy in his eyes when she spoke of her father's death, and Alf's misfortune.

"And you," Tone Murdock's voice bespoke his admiration, "you mean you've stuck it out alone? There's no one else?"

She nodded. "There was nothing else to do. I knew this Rand was at the bottom of it all. But no one would believe me, when I spoke about it. Rand had worked himself in slick with people hereabouts, and even got elected sheriff."

Tone said: "Uh-huh, I begin to see the daylight. I been a fool, a mighty gullible one. Guess my head was kinda empty, along with my stomach, and this Rand, he worked me slick. You ever hear of any outlaws round these parts, known as the Puckett gang?"

"Outlaws here?" And then light dawned on Lynn. "You mean Rand told you that—and that was why I caught you sneaking here, night before last? You thought that you were hunting outlaws? And those other men Rand sent up here—those men with deputy's stars—but no," she added thoughtfully, "I think that they were different."

"I reckon," Tone agreed, "that they were in cahoots with Rand. Gunmen he hired, not wishin', naturally, to risk his reputation with honest citizens.

But when I came along, he saw his chance to play it different."

"What do you mean?" Lynn asked, trying to still the frightful beating of her heart.

Tone explained. "The way it was, you see, when I hit the town of Las Piedras, two days ago, I was just about all in, after five foodless days and nights across the desert. I didn't have a cent; been cleaned out of my ranch and every cent I owned by a bunch of land crooks, down in Texas, where I come from. I'd drifted in to the Elkhorn Bar, hopin' to get a job of work to pay for supper, and the barkeep tried to kick me out. I'd put my dukes up—though I was so weak, Lord knows, that I could hardly stand—when this Rand, who's been watchin' the whole proceedin', interfered.

"The upshot was, he fed me. And when I said I'd pay him off with any job of work he'd give me, he made me a deputy. Told me a cock and bull about a bunch of outlaws that were holed up at a ranch, back in the hills, snipin' off the officers he'd sent to get 'em. Wanted I should spy around and get the lay of things—find out how many of the gang there were and any other information I could get. Claimed if he could get the dope, he'd make a regular raid and clean 'em up. Well, I had that meal to pay for, and I fell for it. I imagine, ma'am—"

"Lynn," she prompted. "You can call me that."

"I imagine, Lynn," he said, "that I've caught this Rand in a pretty little scheme to put the final screws on you. I understand there really have been a few men shot and wounded up this way?"

Lynn's cheeks were scarlet. "I had to, Tone. They tried to break into the house. I warned them, first, and only nicked them, anyhow. I thought Rand might arrest me, but he never has, although he's talked around the town till everyone avoids me."

"And there was one man killed?" Tone prodded.

Lynn's heart stopped beating for just a second. Her lips felt stiff. "No," she cried. "Oh Tone, he told you that? You can't believe it. Tone, you think he means to claim I did? Was someone really killed?"

"I begin to doubt it," Tone replied, "though that's what he claimed. Reckon it was just a little fiction to spur me on. The way I figure, though, Rand had the notion it might work. All he needed was a victim, and me bein' a stranger round these parts, what could be sweeter?"

Lynn cried: "You mean he meant to kill you, then lay the blame on me?"

Tone nodded. "That's the way I got it doped out. Night before last, you see, I met you in the woods—that spoiled his plan. He insisted, though, when I welched because I'd found that there was a woman in this outlaw pack, that I come back last night. He said you were the leader and the toughest of them all. Made me feel that I was honor bound to come. And then—but wait a minute, ma'am. You won't be scared if I go and get a gun out of my saddle pocket? I've emptied it already."

"Of course I won't," she told him. "Not now." She trusted him completely; felt a strange half-happiness, in spite of this thing that he was telling her.

He got the gun—pearl-handled, nickel-barreled—and brought it to her. "This yours?" he asked.

Again, Lynn's heart stopped beating. She could feel the blood drain from her cheeks, as she stared at the weapon which he held. "Yes," she whispered. "A pair of them, my father's, always hung above the fireplace in the living-room. I didn't know—I hadn't noticed one was gone."

Tone said: "I reckon it wouldn't be so hard for a bunch of crooks like Rand's got hired to steal it."

"Tell me," Lynn asked through trembling lips, "where did you get it?"

Tone told her what had taken place the night before, and how, as he left

the place, he had stumbled on the gun. He didn't know that, hidden in the bushes, she had seen it all.

"I figured first," he said, "that it had been dropped there accidental, when the man who'd ambushed me made off. But later, when I looked at it, I knew it had been left a-purpose with what they figured was my dead body. I got an eye for guns, and I remembered seein' this very weapon in the sheriff's office. It was lyin' on his desk when I went in there, and he sort of pushed some papers on it, casual-like. I didn't think much of it at the time, but here last night—well, I sort of doped things out, and made up my mind to come up here and have a talk with whoever it was that was livin' here."

"Oh, Tone," Lynn cried, "how can I ever thank you? Even though it turned out as it did, you didn't know what sort of a reception you would meet. And then that rifle! I'm ashamed. And I can't imagine why you bothered, anyway."

"We'll go into that sometime, real thorough," Tone promised solemnly. "For one thing, though, I'd had my own hard luck with a bunch of crooks, down there in Texas. Only they drove me out. I didn't have the gimp to stick, like you. Anyhow, I figured if Rand was up to somethin' shady, and a girl—a girl like you—tied up in it somehow, I better do a bit of investigatin'. Now I got to figure out some way to deal with this here scorpion. Reckon I better go and see him, first of all.

"Is there any place where you could hide, if I should miss him and he come rarin' up here, bent to do you damage? What's in that little shack, there yonder, all locked up?" Tone pointed toward a small and windowless rock building some twenty paces distant, at the clearing's edge.

"Powder," Lynn told him, "that my dad fetched in to open that vein of ore. He never got to use it. Jammed to the roof, that little building is—no room for anyone. But I'm not afraid of Rand. He'd scarcely dare to harm me in broad daylight. But you, Tone, if you mean to face him with your accusation—"

SHE got no farther, and she and Tone both brought up standing, as a harsh voice snarled: "Hands up, you two, and march ten paces forward, then turn around."

A startled scream parted Lynn's lips, and she stood there motionless, staring at the burly figure topped by Rand's heavy, overflorid face, which had appeared around one corner of the house, while another man, with a deputy's star, appeared around the other. Both men held leveled guns.

Gently Tone led Lynn forward. "Come on," he said. "They've played the winnin' number, this time. They must've found out early that their scheme had failed, and I was still alive. Followed me up here. Take it easy, though. We'll fool 'em yet."

Lynn stepped beside him, out ten paces from the house, and turned around. Her knees were weak as water, and only Tone's strong grip upon her arm made locomotion possible. She knew, if Tone did not, just what the danger was. If Rand had overheard their conversation, he must know his game was up unless he got Tone, now. Tone knew too much. And Tone was helpless—his gun and belt still lay where he had dropped them, when he had first ridden up. The pearl-handled weapon, which he had thrust into his waistband, was empty, useless.

And now Rand spied Tone's fallen gun, himself, and kicked it viciously into the brush. "Go in the house," he told the hireling deputy, "fetch all the guns that you can find, and throw 'em down the well. There ain't goin' to be no slip-ups, this time," he leered at Tone, "no chance for any tricks. And I reckon that it ain't goin' to be so hard to pin the death of the prowlin' stranger on this little hellcat, here." He shot a sneering glance in

Lynn's direction. "She's been right handy with a gun here lately, and there's talk around the valley that her brain is touched."

Lynn heard Tone's muttered curse, and saw his eyes go gray and hard as flint, as he cast a flashing look about him. Lynn knew, though, that he was trapped, helplessly at the mercy of this rogue. And all because he'd tried to help her. That mustn't be.

Lynn said, forcing her trembling voice to steadiness: "Listen, Hilary Rand, you can't let this stranger in for this. I'll give you everything you want—the ranch, the mine—if you'll let him go. And he—he'll promise not to say a word. You've got to, Tone." She turned a pleading look on the tall young man, whose eyes had softened at her speech with a look mingled of surprise and tenderness. He didn't answer right away.

Now, with her eyes fixed anxiously upon his face, Lynn realized that he was moving slowly backward, inch by inch, almost imperceptibly. She didn't understand his purpose, but if Rand should see—

Her panicked gaze swung back to meet the sheriff's calculating one. There was leering triumph in that look, as he seemed to cogitate on her offer; but she was grateful for it, thankful his attention was fixed on her, instead of Tone. Did Tone, she wondered, mean to duck and run? He'd never make it. Rand or his henchman would mow him down before he'd gone a dozen steps.

Then this tool of Rand's, the deputy, came back with the guns he had collected—Lynn's rifle and the other forty-five. He rescued Tone's gun, too, from where Rand had kicked it in the brush, and grinned a smug and snag-toothed smile of satisfaction as he heard the weapons splash, far down in the waters of the well. But as he turned back from this task, he let out a sudden little squawk of warning, and the sheriff's eyes and Lynn's flashed simultaneously to where Tone, with one sudden final step, had brought up flush with the padlocked wooden door of the little building he had asked about.

And then Tone spoke. "Listen, you gents. Put your ear flaps out and don't do somethin' sudden that you might regret. This door I'm leanin' up against—well, it's a wooden door, a rather flimsy one for a buildin' stout as this one is, although I reckon old man Meadows never figured anyone would go to shootin' through it, when he filled this buildin' full of giant powder. And mebbe it would be just as healthy if you didn't try it. You take a shot at me, you savvy, and the bullet's very apt to go on through this flimsy wood. And then—well, all of us, including' even Lynn, would take a trip together. I'd hate that, too—so much in fact that I suggest, Miss Lynn, that you vamose. Take that gray hoss of mine and ride down valley. You might meet someone on the way who'd be interested in this little party. There must be a few honest folks around these diggin's."

For just a moment, Lynn could not believe her ears. Such a crazy, long-odds chance Tone was taking, and she didn't for a minute think that, even if Rand fired at Tone, the dynamite would explode, the way he said.

But Lynn's surprise was nothing to Rand's rage. He was fairly apoplectic, and his henchman stood bug-eyed and white with fear. Yet neither one had moved a trigger-finger.

And now Rand snarled at Lynn: "Wait just a minute, you." And then to Tone: "What's to prevent our shootin' her? You mean to say you'd let her die, after the offer she just made to save your life? Listen, both of you. I'll take her up. I'll let you both go free, if you'll put the deal in writin'—me to get the property, you to keep your buzzers buttoned up."

Before Lynn could answer, Tone spoke up: "Offer refused. Lynn's doin' what I tell her to. As for shootin' her—you've passed a bet. I got a gun here in my belt that you sorta over-

looked, though it's true enough that up to now I've had no chance to use it. While I'm not exactly a champeen on the draw, still and all I never been considered slow, and you gents are handicapped by what I've got behind me."

Rand snarled: "You're bluffin'. If a bullet hit you first, it'd never touch the door. It mightn't blow the powder, if it did."

"Might not," Tone said agreeably. "The only way we'll ever know is to try it out."

Lynn gasped instinctively, and Rand and his deputy both turned loose a flood of language such as she had never heard before.

"You really ought be goin'," Tone said to Lynn. "This is hardly a fit place for a lady. We'll be waitin' for you here. Rand'll scarcely try a getaway, knowin' about this gun of mine, and what might happen if he did."

Words of vehement protest flooded to Lynn's lips. She knew too well that the gun there in his belt was empty, and whether that powder bluff would work or not, she knew his peril. That her own life was in danger, too, did not occur to her.

But after all, the words of protest on her lips were never uttered. She'd met Tone Murdock's piercing gaze, and there was something in its urgency which completely melted her own will. She knew she had to trust him, play to the end this desperate game that he was chancing.

She whirled, and without a single glance toward the scoundrelly sheriff or his deputy, started for Tone's horse.

She heard Rand say, between his curses: "Look, fella, a thousand dollars, if you let us go and just forget all this."

Tone laughed.

As Lynn scrambled into the saddle, Rand said: "Ten thousand."

Tone called: "Wait just a minute, Lynn. I got a notion I might dicker. Pull off a piece, though, where you'll be safer, if Rand should change his mind and blow this powder."

It seemed to Lynn as if the iron bands about her chest tightened unbearably. Fright was spilling from her eyes as she looked back at Tone. What did he mean to do? Some new idea had occurred to him, she knew, some desperate gamble. He never meant to dicker with these crooks.

"I'll take you, Rand," Tone said. "But before I budge, both you two gents throw down those smoke machines you're holdin'. I'm not takin' any chances."

"Nor us," Rand snarled. "How about that gun there in your belt?"

"Reckon you'll have to trust me," Tone said pleasantly. "Just suit yourself. Any way you play it is all right with me. I could use ten thousand. I'm thinkin' that Lynn and me might hitch—that is, of course, if she would say the word. But on the other hand, there'll be a heap of satisfaction seein' Lynn fetch up some honest citizens."

As Lynn's anxious gaze flashed toward the sheriff, she thought that he might burst an artery. The deputy, too, was hurling bitter exclamations. "Damn your ornery hide," Rand roared at last, "I wish I'd let you starve to death, back there in Las Piedras, or let that barkeep kick you into hell." And then he threw his gun down savagely, with such force it skittered to within three feet of where Tone stood. Rand's hired gunman followed suit.

What happened after that happened so fast Lynn hardly knew what it was all about as she saw the three men pounce as one for the fallen guns. Tone reached Rand's first, and stopped the hired thug with a well aimed bullet just as he stooped to lift his weapon. Then he turned the gun on Rand.

Rand was licked. He collapsed like a pricked balloon. "Come on," Tone said, prodding him none too gently toward the house, "you're goin' to write a full confession. Just in case," he added, turning back to Lynn, who was following in a sort of unbeliev-

ing daze, "in case he's got the whole community so turned against you they won't believe your story. That's what made me change my mind about you ridin' after help—figured you might have trouble findin' anybody who would come with you, the way Rand's spread the notion you were just a little touched.

"In the meantime, too, I thought some more of Rand's hired men might show up here, or Rand get desperate and chance a shot. Whether the powder blew or didn't, it wouldn't have made much difference, then, to me. And I had a hankerin', Lynn, to live and ask that question I was speakin' of, a while ago."

Lynn felt the hot blood flooding back to warm cold cheeks and frozen lips. It was quite a while before she answered, though.

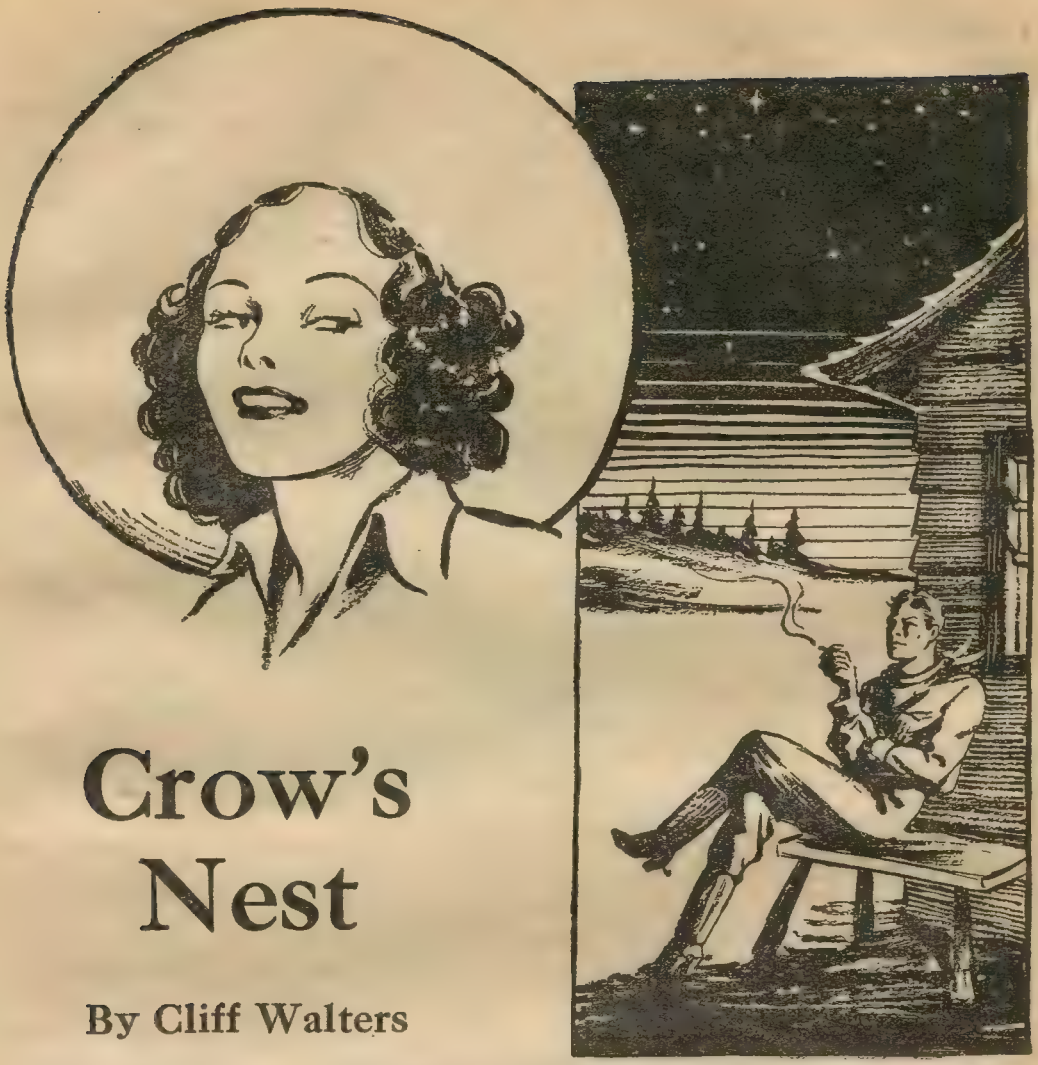
Tone was particular that Rand should write a full confession, beginning with the time he'd first heard, from an assayer down in Denver, of the ore Alf Meadows had discovered. He told how he tried to buy the ranch and, failing, had tried to run the Meadows out—poisoned the water, started the fire, and instigated the stampede in which Lynn's dad had lost his life.

He admitted, too—the muzzle of the gun Tone held against his back was quite persuasive—that the fight in which Alf Meadows had been trapped had been a plant of his, and the sending of the deputies to the ranch to molest the girl a trick to get a case against her. Reluctantly, at last, he made confession that he had hired his thugs to shoot Tone, meaning to blame the girl.

But with the confession signed, and Rand trussed neatly in his chair, Tone put the question Lynn longed to hear. "I haven't much to offer," he finished solemnly, "and you'll be rich some day. Still and all, I'd aim to pay you somehow. Mebbe," he smiled a little wryly, "you'd have a job that I could do—like the sheriff, yonder."

But Lynn's arms were tight around his neck and she was laughing softly. "Pay me? Oh, Tone, how can you speak of that? If it hadn't been for you, where would I be?"

"Well, anyhow, as it turned out," Tone said, "you're right here in my arms." Suiting the action to the words, they both were so engrossed, they didn't even hear the mumbled curses of Hilary Rand, trussed in his chair, behind them.



Crow's Nest

By Cliff Walters

Jerry's uncle musta had a grudge against him when he left him the Crow's Nest, for nothin' grew on it but rocks and cedar trees. Yet Jerry found love there an' on that account, happiness.

FOR thirty long miles Jerry Blair and me have been joggin' our horses over the grass-tufted terrain of Bunch Grass Basin. Finally we spot a huddle of houses on the level landscape, which is Jerry's cue to remark:

"There we are, Stovepipe. The town we've trailed over a hundred miles to find—Rockville."

"Since there's only one alleged town in this Basin, and since all them houses are built of rock, you could be right," I answer.

"But it still seems like I'm trailin' through a dream," my smilin' sidekick resumes. "I was about reconciled to the idea of straddlin' somebody else's horses for forty dollars per, the rest of my life, when along comes that lovely letter tellin' me I've inherited a ranch. Gosh! If luck was rain, I'd be a cloudburst!"

"And speakin' of things wet," I says, "let's bee-line it for that stone edifice flauntin' a saloon sign. I could go for a cold glass of beer like hungry wolves go for gallopin' veal steaks."

"Why not?" says the sparklin'-eyed Jerry. "What do we care for this last

five-dollar bill? We're fallin' into riches. Come on, cowboy!" And tightenin' the lead rope on our pack horse, he spurs into Rockville.

A minute later we're bustin' into the Bunch Grass Saloon, invitin' all the loafers in Rockville up to the bar—the whole five of 'em—and listenin' to the concerted filteration of cold foam through droopin' mustaches. Finally the one-eyed barkeep, a hook-nosed little hombre called Pack-Rat, ventures:

"Since you two waddies is so generous about strikin' up an acquaintance with the leadin' citizens of Rockville, maybe you're figgerin' to stay with us a while?"

"I hope so," says an old codger named Thirsty Morgan, lookin' long at the ceilin' through the bottom of his beer glass.

"Yep!" I says, maybe a little bit overanxious to satisfy their curiosity. "This handsome young gent"—I point to the grinning Jerry—"is none other than Mr. Blair, only heir of the recently deceased old Ike Blair, and inheritor of the Mirage Springs Ranch!"

This startlin' information is greeted by silence which lasts a long moment. Then, as if they'd been rehearsin' their act, the five loafers and the barkeep let out a war-whoop of laughter that fairly rocks Rockville on its foundations. While my face's gettin' redder than a bay horse's, the bent-over Thirsty Morgan straightens up, hitches his overalls high enough to avert an accident, and chortles:

"Goshamighty! You mean to stand there in broad daylight, and admit that you won Mirage Springs?"

"That's what I said, you guffawin' galoots!" I retort. "Why? What's so confounded comical about a nephew inheritin' his uncle's spread?"

"Just what grudge did your Uncle Ike hold agin you?" inquires Pack-Rat, the barkeep, of Jerry.

"Grudge?" the embarrassed youth replies. "Why—why he never liked me very well, but—"

Another chorus of maniacal mirth greets Jerry's words. Then the five loafers laugh their way out of the saloon and into the street, leavin' us standin' there gawkin' after 'em. Finally Jerry asks the barkeep where we can find one Sam Jones, the Rockville lawyer that sent the letter informin' my pard of his inheritance. Pack-Rat grins and explains that the town's only legal luminary can be found in an old stone shack across the street.

"Come on, Stovepipe," says Jerry, headin' for the door.

We're hardly outside when we see Thirsty Morgan and his cronies gathered around a buckboard. But Jerry's eyes ain't on the hard-bitten old veteran that's pilotin' the vehicle. His wrapt gaze is focused on the young lady settin' beside the driver, a girl with big blue eyes, golden hair and a pair of dimples that could make any young man's heart start sunfishin' agin his ribs.

"It's rude to stare that way," I caution him, grabbin' his arm.

"And it's rude to laugh so loud, and so long, right in our faces like them fellows did," he answers. "Is that a girl in a buckboard, or it is a goddess in a golden chariot? Once last June I think the sky got as blue as her eyes."

But just then Thirsty Morgan and his cronies start cacklin' ag'in and pointin' to us, which is our cue to hurry toward the rock shanty which is Sam Jones' office. We find the two-hundred-pound attorney snorin' in his sag-bottomed chair, and with his mouth open wide enough to look like the main entrance to a grizzly's cave. Whereupon we boot his legs hard enough to restore consciousness, and state our business *pronto*.

"What's so all-fired funny about that Mirage Springs place?" Jerry wants to know.

"Well, it has its drawbacks," Mr. Jones admits. "Those springs dry up pretty much every fall, as you'll see when you get out there. And with the exception of a small pasture, nearly all the land lays up on what we call the

Crow's Nest, which is nothin' but rock and cedar trees."

"And that's what you wrote me to trail over a hundred miles for, is it?" The irate Jerry edges his hand toward his gun. "Playin' April Fool jokes in September, eh? For a rusty nickel, I'd pump you so fulla hot lead you'd look like a moth-eaten saddle blanket!"

"Woop! Hold on now!" yells the alert attorney, backin' away from the fires in Jerry's dark eyes. "It ain't my fault. I only carried out your Uncle Ike's orders. Legal routine, you know. Of course, it was unfortunate for Ike Blair—and his heirs—that he bought that lemon from old Matt Stanion in the first place, like several other suckers have done."

"So somebody saddled a lemon on to him, and he passed the rind along to me, eh?"

"Well, it—it kinda looks that way," Sam Jones agrees, circlin' cautiously around to the other side of the table. "It's somewhat of a standin' joke, that Crow's Nest property. But it's yours, Mr. Blair. And maybe Matt Stanion might pay you a hundred dollars for it, just for that pasture. That ain't much when you consider that your uncle paid two thousand cash for it, but—"

"Who is this swindlin' old buzzard, Matt Stanion?" Jerry inquires, hostile enough to wring a teased tiger's tail.

"The big cowman that owns most of this Basin," Jones explains. "He owns plenty of cattle and land, the Bar B outfit. That's him you see just drivin' out of town there, the old gent in the buckboard, with the frisky black team, and his pretty daughter, Barbara, ridin' with him."

Jerry stares, gulps and groans, "Huh! So the goddess is Swindler Stanion's daughter!"

"I don't know as I'd call him a swindler exactly," Jones goes on. "He's honest enough, but a pretty fast dealer. Business is a game of checkers with him. Jump the other fellow—that's his motto."

WE'RE feelin' lower'n a horned toad's chest when, after spendin' the rest of our five-dollar bill for grub, we head out of Rockville and toward that cedared bump on the badlands. As we ride along Main Street, we encounter further irritations. Apparently Thirsty Morgan has been doin' some gossipin' while we're interviewin' Lawyer Jones, for, peekin' their impish faces around the corners of rock buildin's, is a bunch of yowlin' kids, yellin':

"Crow's Nest! Crow's Nest! Caw, caw, ca-a-aw!"

Not only that, but the womanfolks is peekin' outa windows and gigglin' at us. I can see without aid of a high-powered microscope that Jerry's mad enough to bite horseshoes, while my own long countenance is crimson as the label on a tomato can.

Jerry spurs up, me followin' suit, with that "Crow's Nest! Crow's Nest! Caw, caw, ca-a-aw!" still ringin' in my ears.

"Well, what do you think about it now, cowboy?" I impolitely inquire. "It looks like you've done a relay rider's switch from a dream to a nightmare. Just a Mirage Springs." I steal a glance at him from the corner of my optics. "How much livestock did Jones say went with your new outfit? Two jack-asses?"

"There'll be four—after we get out there!" Jerry snaps.

"But from what I hear of the place, I don't think we'll stay," I answer. "We can't live on the smell of cedar wood and water, if there's still enough of the latter to moisten our tonsils. Maybe we'd better trail back north and see if we can't get our jobs back with the Arrow Cross outfit. Of course, it'll be a little embarrassin', too, goin' back there and tellin' them other grinnin' waddies that we didn't find the pot of gold at the rainbow's end, that it was only a Crow's Nest—caw, caw, caw!"

Jerry says nothin'. He only glowers across the treeless hills, scowls at the Bar B cattle grazin' there, and rolls a cigarette.

"You could sell it to Matt Stanion for a hundred—" I begin. But he cuts me off shorter than wool on a shorn lamb.

"Not by a damn sight! Old Stanion ain't goin' to buy back for a measly hundred dollars what he sold for two thousand! I'll sell it to somebody else, or starve to death out there, 'fore I'll sell it back to that nickel-pinchin' Piute! Anyhow, we've got enough grub to run us a few days while we think things over. Too, we'll have plenty of wood."

After five miles of joggin' through the haze of Indian summer, we come to where the deep-rutted road passes an old cabin made of cedar logs 'fore it runs on up the hills to the top of that rough promontory known as the Crow's Nest. Then we see somethin' that makes our eyes bulge. There's guests at our new home. Mounted bareback on one of the black horses of the buckboard team which he's unhooked, old Matt Stanion is roundin' up a little bunch of horses in the pasture by the cabin, and headin' 'em out the gate. Two seconds later, Jerry's blockin' the gate, headin' the horses off, and Stanion's yellin':

"Let them horses out. Can't you see I'm tryin' to—"

"I can see," my pard answers plenty cool, "that you're tryin' to beat the Blair estate outa some pasture bill. Let's see. Twenty-one head of horses at a dollar apiece comes to twenty-one dollars, if figgers don't lie."

"A dollar a head!" the hard-bitten old cowman snorts. "Why, it ain't worth that much. Besides, I figured the grass in this pasture would go plumb to waste."

"No money, no horses," Jerry decrees. "I'll hold 'em. And the pasture rates'll advance considerable from now on."

"But I tell you I haven't got that much money with me, nor my checkbook either!" the keen-eyed Stanion rants.

At this point, Barbara Stanion climbs out of the buckboard and walks over to the gate.

"If you'll be kind enough to let Dad get his horses out," she says to Jerry, "I'll bring your twenty-one dollars over in the morning. I promise."

Enthralled by those big blue eyes and the music in her voice, Jerry Blair's sternness melts like snowflakes fallin' on a forest fire. Judgin' from his smile, I'm scared he's goin' to cancel the debt and bust into a serenade to beauty. But, even lookin' into the cerulean depths of Barbara Stanion's eyes, he apparently don't forget that we're flatter than the grasshopper that the Hereford bull stepped on.

"Certainly, Miss Stanion," he agrees to her proposition. Then he tells her his name and remembers to introduce me.

"Stovepipe Powell!" She laughs as soft as a mountain stream purlin' over mossy boulders. "What a peculiar nickname!"

"But appropriate," says the grinnin' Jerry. "See how long and thin he is! Too, he's most always smokin'—and a little bit rusty on top."

While this banter's goin' on, old Matt Stanion chases his horses out the gate, heads 'em for home, which lays three miles away, and starts hookin' up his team again.

"See you tomorrow, Jerry!" Barbara calls.

"Here's hopin'!" he answers.

It's funny how much better Jerry likes the country after his meetin' up with a certain pair of blue eyes. He plumb forgets about inheritin' a Crow's Nest instead of a ranch, and a herd of cedar trees instead of whiteface dogies. That evenin' he sets out in front of the cabin gawkin' up at the stars and hummin' a song—and occasionally lookin' off toward the big stone ranch house at the Bar B. His strange actions worry me some. But when I try to bring him back to earth by sayin' somethin' about how thankful he'd ought to be for the twenty-one dollars comin' in, he only says:

"Yep. I'll be seein' her ag'in tomorrow, Stovepipe. Gosh! Did you ever see such a complexion? And hair that seems to put the sunset's gold to shame? And a cute, straight little nose that—"

"I've seen riders bucked off over rimrocks, and not fall any harder!" I snort. "Don't forget that old Matt Stanion ain't no friend of yours. And don't forget them 'Caw, caw, caws,' we heard today in town, nor the way them old barflies hooted in your handsome face."

"I won't," he says. "I can't. And I'll hook my spurs in Matt Stanion's pocketbook every chance I get, if I get any more. But, golly! When that girl smiles, it's just like—"

"I'm goin' to bed," I says. "It's gettin' chilly out here. And bein' considerable older than you are, no girl's smile warms me so much that I have to push my chair back."

"Hers would," he retorts, dreamily.

"Yeah?" I grunt. "Cedar wood. Caw, caw, caw!" And I stomp my run-over boot heels indoors.

TRUE to her promise, Barbara comes over the next morning all right. But she fetches more than the twenty-one dollars with her. She's accompanied by a husky young man she introduces to Jerry and me as Lew Allinger, one of her dad's majordomos, who looks after the south end of the Bar B range. After a dead fish hand shake, Allinger volunteers the information that him and the daughter of the Bar B is engaged to be married shortly.

"I see." My pard turns haunted eyes on the girl. "I was hopin' that—well—that you was runnin' loose without any man's brand on you."

"Why?" chirps up Allinger, his gray eyes narrowed. "Do you think she'd be interested in anyone unfortunate enough to inherit this patch of rock and cedar?"

"Just a minute, Lew," the girl cuts in. "Jerry Blair took enough kidding in town yesterday about the Crow's Nest. Besides, it's Dad's fault. He shouldn't have taken old Ike Blair's money for a worthless place like this. It was legal, of course. Dad called it sharp business, but just the same—"

"Sure it was sharp business," Allinger interrupts. "Anyhow, young Blair here ain't got any squawk comin', has he? It didn't cost him anythin'."

"You haven't heard me squawkin', have you, Allinger?" Jerry says, cool as the autumn mornin'. Then, turnin' to me, he says, "S'pose you entertain Mr. Allinger a little while, Stovepipe. I want to take Miss Barbara down there and show her them lovely springs."

Laughing, the girl turns her pony around and follows him. But Lew Allinger don't chuckle none. He scowls blacker'n a thunder-cloud and mutters somethin' through his pale-colored mustache.

"Charmin' day," I says, by way of conversation.

"What the hell's so charmin' about it?" he wants to know, glaring at the wanderin' girl and Jerry. "Watchin' the girl you're goin' to marry hobnobbin' around with the first handsome hobo that comes along?"

"Jerry is a handsome kid, ain't he?" I come back. "You'll ride a long ways, Mr. Allinger, 'fore you see a better lookin' couple than them two make. Gosh! I'd give my right lung to see 'em waltzin' together. When are they havin' the next dance in Rockville?"

"Next Saturday!" he rasps, irritated as the bear which met the family of skunks on a one-way trail. "But I'll be doin' all the waltzin' with Barbara. Besides, if you and that Blair hombre was to show up in town, they'd probably laugh you right back out—like I hear they done yesterday."

"Who's afraid of a big, bad laugh?" I retort. "That's the trouble with the world. Not enough sunshine and cheer. Now, take the way you're scowlin', for instance. How much better it'd be if you'd point the ends of your mustache up toward your ears, instead of—"

"Aw, dry up!" he grates. "And tell Barbara—if she ever gets through gaddin' with that tramp—that I've gone up on the Crow's Nest to see about a place to haul the Bar B wood from, like old Matt told me to." And, whirlin' his gray horse around on its haunches, he clatters up the steep road leadin' up between the two high points of rock.

Barbara Stanion lingers around as if she ain't averse to Jerry's companionship, which makes my stalwart pard happier'n the old prospector that found the canyonful of nuggets. And I'm well enough pleased, if it's only 'cause I know it must be gettin' under Lew Allinger's skin. When I tell 'em where Allinger went—to look for wood to be hauled from the Crow's Nest to the Bar B Ranch—Barbara accepts my invitation to stay for dinner. And Jerry flashes me one of them smiles that comes from only the gratefullest of grateful hearts.

When we're alone that evenin', Jerry says: "So the Bar B's ready to start haulin' their winter's supply of wood, are they?"

"Yep," I says. "That's all anybody could possibly want from this place."

"But they do want it," he says right back. "They've got to have wood. And from what Barbara tells me, this is the only wood in this whole Basin. And the nearest place they can get coal is from Hamilton, fifty long miles away."

"You mean," I answer, gulpin', "that if the Crow's Nest was fenced, you'd have a corner on all the fuel supply?"

"Just that." He grins broader than a Stetson hat. "And it won't take much fencin'. Teams have got to go past this cabin to get up on the rim. Maybe we'd better start buildin' a fence between them two points in the mornin'. There's some barb wire here."

WHEN Jerry ain't helpin' me build fence for the next few days, he's ridin' across the treeless hills with Barbara Stanion. Then one chilly mornin' along comes eight teams from the Bar B, teams pullin' wood racks and accompanied by old Matt Stanion and his straw boss, Lew Allinger.

"Hey, what's the idea of a padlock on this gate in the new fence?" Stanion yells to me and Jerry. "What's the use of puttin' a fence up here in the first place?"

"Maybe to keep Bar B cattle from grazin' off them cedars up there!" Allinger rasps.

"Just a minute, Mr. Stanion," Jerry calls. "I'll unlock it for you." And soon the teams are trailin' through and up the steep hill.

"Another thing, Blair," the old cattle king says, while him and Allinger rein their horses toward the cabin. "Lew here tells me you've been ridin' around a lot with my daughter lately. Don't you know that she's engaged to Lew?"

"I've never heard her say so," Jerry answers, eying the owner of the Bar B steadily.

"Maybe you and Lew-Lew are jumpin' at conclusions, Mr. Stanion," I chirp up, not able to pass up a chance to rowel the scowlin' Allinger.

"I'll be jumpin' right smack on somebody's neck if this hornin'-in business ain't cut out!" Allinger grates. "I ain't goin' to set by and see—"

"Well, you ain't chained to that saddle, are you?" Jerry prompts.

"You're damn right I ain't!" Sayin' which, the husky straw boss of the Bar B makes a bulldogger's dive for Jerry's sunburned neck. But Jerry moves from where's he's been standin' just before a hundred and eighty pounds of Lew Allinger hits. The latter, not meetin' the resistance he's expectin', swings off balance and roots the dust with his flat nose. Then, bellowin' like the bull that saw red, he leaps to his feet and lands a glancin' blow off the side of Jerry's head. But the stalwart Jerry ain't exactly imitatin' a fence post by this time. He grits his teeth and cuts loose with a cloudburst of right and left fists that

makes the cussin' Allinger think it's rainin' knuckles.

In the middle of things, tearin' up comes Barbara Stanion. She screams somethin' at the two fighters, but they don't pay no more attention to her than a petrified tree would to a soft-nosed bullet. And a minute later Lew Allinger couldn't hear a brass band, 'cause he takes one of Jerry's right swings square on the jaw, and goes sprawlin' over backwards flatter than a tortilla.

"Who—who started the fight?" gasps the wide-eyed girl.

"You did," her dad snaps, "when you started runnin' around the range with this tramp!" And he points to Jerry.

"Maybe I wouldn't be a tramp," Jerry pants, "if Uncle Ike hadn't let an old vulture like you dig into his pockets. And maybe I won't be, anyhow, after I get through with you."

"Me?" Stanion inquires. "Huh! Don't think you're goin' to get any more money out of me. That twenty-one dollars settled things between us for good! You won't get another nickel out of the Bar B!"

"And I'll bet that twenty-one dollars that I do," Jerry says.

"It's a bet!" Stanion snaps. "Barbara, you'd better get back to the ranch. I don't want you hangin' around this place any more."

"Well, I'll go, for the time being," she answers. Then, leaning over in her saddle, she throws her arm around Jerry's neck, kisses his bruised cheek, and tears back toward the Bar B, leavin' her perplexed papa starin' after her.

"Huh!" grunts the cattle king at last. "So that's the way things stand, is it? Well, Blair, I guess you win your bet. I said you wouldn't get any more money out of me, but I've changed my mind. There's somethin' I think more of than I do all the land or cattle or money in the world—that girl there. I can't have her turnin' Lew down to marry the first good-lookin' tramp that comes along. I'll give you a thousand dollars cash for this worthless place if you'll leave the country—now—and never come back."

"Nope." Jerry shakes his head. "Maybe it's 'cause Barbara's so darn different from her dad that I've fallen in love with her. But I have. I did the first day I laid eyes on her. Your money can buy this place, Matt Stanion, but it can't my heart."

"Fifteen hundred!" the nettled cowman snaps.

"Nope."

"Two thousand. And that's my limit!"

But still Jerry shakes his dark head. "There ain't enough money coined to make me leave Bunch Grass Basin. Besides, this place is worth more than your offer."

"Bull-headed fool!" Stanion snorts. "You couldn't sell this bunch of rocks and cedar trees for two hundred dollars to any sane person." And he swings down from his horse to help Lew Allinger get on his feet again.

"Don't try to bribe him," Allinger mumbles. "He'll leave this Basin, and without bein' paid for it!"

"Yeah?" Jerry drawls. "Well, you'd better try some other kind of weapons than fists next time you try scarin' me out, Mr. Allinger, 'cause you couldn't hit a cow broadside with them haymakers of yours."

Our two guests leave in a huff, but it ain't many hours later that the eight Bar B teams come brakin' down the steep slope, pullin' big loads of dry cedar wood.

"Open that gate again!" Stanion hollers to Jerry and me as we stand there leanin' against the barbed wire.

"Sure," says Jerry. "Shell out five dollars a load for that wood and I will."

"Not by a darn sight!" the cattleman roars. "I've hauled wood off this Crow's Nest for twenty years, and I'll keep right on haulin' it!"

"If you pay for it you can," Jerry answers. "It's my wood now."

"This is a hold-up!" Stanion booms.

"Nope," Jerry says. "It won't cost you a nickel—if you don't want the

wood. Just have your men unload it there by the cabin. If you do want it—well—a check or an I. O. U. for forty dollars'll be all right. Oh, yes! And that extra twenty-one that you'll owe me on our bet."

"Open that gate!" Lew Allinger calls out. At the same time he makes a dive for his gun. But, not bein' much faster with forty-fives than with his fists, Jerry and me has him covered and shakin' in his boots 'fore he can clear leather.

"No gun-play!" Stanion orders. "I'll pay this cutthroat his money." And, instead of goin' for his gun, he goes for his check-book.

"I'll soon put a stop to this swindle," the cowman goes on as he hands Jerry the check. "All this wood ain't on your land. Come on, Lew! Let's hit for town. You haven't used your homestead rights yet, have you?"

"No, sir!" Allinger gloats eagerly. "I'll be tickled pink to oblige. Let's go!" And away they tear, headin' for town.

"Well, that's that," I says to Jerry. "They'll file on the other side of the Crow's Nest, build a road up there, and we'll starve to death."

"Not so mournful, Stovepipe," answers my pard, grinnin'. "When Barbara and me was out ridin' day before yesterday, we rode into town and I filed on the other part of the Crow's Nest. Old Stanion and Allinger are just givin' their horses a workout for nothin'."

DURIN' the followin' week the weather turns a little chillier, and business picks up around the Crow's Nest. But the heir to Mirage Springs don't stay around home much. He's too busy whisperin' saccharin syllables in Barbara Stanion's attentive ears. And me, I'm gettin' hoarse from standin' at the toll gate and hollerin', "Crow's Nest! Caw, caw, ca-a-aw!" every time I collect for a load of wood from any of the Rockvillers or Bar B drivers. I nearly bust my Adam's apple the first day Thirsty Morgan pays for his two loads of fuel.

One moonlight night Jerry and me are settin' in the cabin countin' up our profits when—*boom!*—an explosion rocks the world and nearly jars us up out of our boots. Dodging a flyin' spray of rock, we bust outdoors just in time to ketch sight of a rider tearin' along the high rim above the cabin. Just one minute later we're on our horses, and tearin' up there after him. He tries playin' hide and seek with us among the rocks and cedars up on the Crow's Nest. But the moonlight's in our favor, and finally we start crowdin' him like a pair of hungry wolves would a frantic fox.

The rider, whoever he is, opens up on us with his forty-five when we start gettin' too close. We return the compliment and hot lead, dodgin' rocks, trees and bullets as we race along. It's a merry chase for several minutes, but at last we're close enough to hear a gun hammer clickin' on empty chambers—and close enough to recognize Lew Allinger.

Seein' Jerry slide his gun back in his holster and reach for his lariat, I follow suit. Not but what I'm feelin' like perforatin' Mr. Allinger for aimin' that charge of dynamite at our rustic residence. Then Allinger, findin' himself bein' crowded into a blind canyon, takes his only chance. He spins his horse around and tries boltin' between me and Jerry as we close in on him. Our lariats cut loose at the same time, snare the fleein' dynamiter, and yank him to earth. Nor do we stop travelin'. Playin' like our prisoner's a bawlin' calf, instead of a pleadin'-for-mercy skunk, we head for an imaginary brandin' fire back at our cabin.

"These cedars ain't high enough to hang a man on up here," Jerry calls to me, and loud enough for sand-scoopin' Lew Allinger to hear. "We'll have to use the ridge log on the barn!"

"No! No!" the gruntin' drag begs. "I'll square things with—"

But we don't stop skiddin' the seat

of Allinger's overalls till we get to what's left of the cabin.

"Good gosh, Stovepipe!" Jerry yells, pointin' down to the spring. "Look at the water flowin' down there! Why, that dynamite blowed that spring out till it's— Look at that water gurglin' away!"

By this time, however, a bunch of Bar B riders who must've heard the explosion, come tearin' up. Barbara Stanion, her pretty face a little pale, is with 'em. And so is her money-grabbin' papa. The cowman wants to know what's goin' on. But I have to do the explainin', 'cause Jerry couldn't talk if he wanted to, the way Barbara's arms are cinched around his neck.

"Huh!" old Stanion grunts when I'm through. "So Allinger tried to blow you fellers up, but missed his aim just enough to assure you of a good supply of water." He frowns at the chalk-faced straw boss. "I don't approve of murder, Lew."

"I was doin' it partly for you," Allinger wails. "Blair was robbin' you on the wood proposition, and—"

"That ain't the reason you tried to kill him though," Matt Stanion says, shakin' his gray head. "He won Barbara away from you. She loves him, and is provin' it plenty by her actions. Look at 'em!" He chuckles softly. "It's goin' to be swell, havin' a smart son-in-law like that enterprisin' lad, one that can outwit even a money shark like me."

Yep, the Crow's Nest is a part of the Bar B outfit now, folks. And yours truly is range foreman. And Barbara and Jerry's happier than I am even when I'm in Rockville hootin' at Thirsty Morgan with a lusty, if not polite, "Crow's Nest! Caw, caw, ca-a-aw!"

Do You Like Bracelets?

Do you want one of the lovely Trail's End bracelets pictured below? On each of these beautiful pieces of jewelry is the insignia of the Trail's End Club, and the bracelet costs only twenty-five cents.

If you desire one, send this coupon, together with twenty-five cents, to the Trail's End Editor, Ranch Romances, 578 Madison Ave., New York.

I am a member of the Trail's End Club.

I am enclosing twenty-five cents ($.25), for which please send me one Trail's End bracelet.

Name.....

Address .....

.....

Please print your name and address plainly.

3-22-35

A
Romantic Serial

Devil's

Mystery was afoot in Flagville; it hovered over young, virile and courageous Jim Vesper dered her helpless before its murky obscurity.

CHAPTER I

Guns of Gallantry

JIM VESPER hit Flagville, that day, with the dusk. Riding a bay horse and leading a red pack mule, he came up Main Street, past a double row of unpainted frame buildings, garish by day, but soft now in the rosy mists of the sunset's afterglow. There was a fragrance in the stirring twilight breeze. There was an incipient hum and bustle along the town's plank sidewalks. A girl in a black dress, standing in the doorway of one of a long line of shuttered shacks, called to him. From the open doors of the Golden Slipper there came to him a blast of ragtime played upon a mechanical piano. At the corner of Main and Center streets, a man who had set up a skillet-flare, asked him to guess which walnut shell concealed a tiny pea.

But Jim Vesper gave no heed to the girl, to the music, or to the gambler. He set up his pony in front of the Wells Fargo Express office and swung down to the street—tall, tanned, wiry, the firm features of his lean, sensitive face set and taut. He stood there a moment, lank in his faded blue jeans, the smell of wood smoke and of saddle leather about him. The long fingers of his hands worked nimbly as he tied

Part

Disciples

By Herbert A. Woodbury

the lovely Nancy Paige, taunted her, and ren- More than he wanted anything else in the world, knew he wanted to be her champion.

One

the pack mule's lead rope to the hitching-rail.

From the mule's pack saddle he lifted two hair-covered box kyacks. The boxes he carried inside the express office. He waited while the clerk weighed their contents on a scale and gave him a receipt for nearly a hundred pounds of gold nuggets. Then he walked back into the dusk of Main Street, untied his mule, remounted his bay, and rode a block farther to the hitching-rail in front of the Golden Palace Hotel.

An hour later, his animals in stalls in the stable behind the hotel, Jim Vesper sat in the enormous tin bath tub on the hotel's fourth floor. And only then, under the relaxing effect of the hot bath, did the tension ebb out of him. Only then did he awaken from the daze in which he had moved for the past week.

A hundred pounds of gold, almost pure! He was rich! Rich! Rich! A slow smile overspread the face, which so often in the past six, difficult months had looked older than its twenty-seven years. The grim setness of purpose left the black eyes. The smile became a grin. Jim wanted suddenly to stand up and shout. He was rich! And here he was in Flagville with its bar upon every corner; with its dance hall adjoining every bar!

He lathered his chest; ducked his head under water, and washed from his black hair the alkali dust of the hills. He shaved; kicked his faded blue jeans into a corner, slipped into black broadcloth trousers, pulled a white shirt down over his head, and stepped into his Sunday, white-butterfly-inlaid boots. He tied a red neckerchief about his tanned neck. He buckled at his waist a worn cartridge belt, from the well tallowed holster of which there protruded, butt forward for a cross draw, the ivory stock of a Colt thirty-eight special.

And then, tingling with expectation, he descended the carpeted staircase to the gilt and red-plush lobby at which he'd gazed with unseeing eyes as he'd first passed through it. Latticed swinging doors giving upon the hotel's bar opened off the lobby. Jim started toward this room, from which came the hubbub of laughter and conversation.

But before he had crossed the lobby, from somewhere behind him a girl's voice rose in a cry of pain. Jim Vesper whirled. And in whirling he altered the whole future course of his life.

On the landing of the grand staircase which he had just descended, stood a tawny-haired young girl of about—he judged—eighteen or nineteen or twenty. At her side, trying to embrace her in huge, pawing arms while she fought back, was a man.

Jim bounded forward.

He reached the foot of the staircase; took the steps three at a time. Reaching the man's side before the man could whirl away from the girl to meet his onslaught, Jim caught the girl's annoyer by the scruff of his neck and spun him about. Simultaneously, with his left arm, he started a blow from his knees and drove it upward, with all the power that his hundred and eighty pounds could pack into the punch, into his adversary's face.

It was short; and, to Jim, it was sweet. The man's head shot up; a face lined with dissipation went blank. He rocked back on his heels and then plunged headlong over backward, down the staircase to the lobby below. Nor did he get up. He lay there in a limp heap, like a rag doll.

Vindictiveness was a strange emotion to Jim Vesper. But there flooded over him a wave of sharp, biting malice as he watched the man lie there so still. He had turned to the girl; he had seen the ugly red patch upon her wrist where the man had twisted her skin. It seemed to Jim that if he'd broken the man's neck in hurling him down the staircase, he'd done only what was meet and fitting and proper. He didn't care! Not in the least!

Slowly, he turned back to the girl. Two eyes, very deep and very blue, were regarding him in a sort of awesome wonder. Jim tried to speak, and for the moment couldn't. He had bounded to her rescue with no other thought than that she was a woman, and that she needed help. He saw now that she was not only a woman, but that she was the sort of woman which he hadn't met, knocking about the haunts of men, since he had left the home of his mother and sisters, years and years before in Texas.

A sudden bashfulness filled him. The color for no reason whatever flooded to the tips of his ears. He felt, standing close to her—so slender, so young, and so lovely—awkward, embarrassed, uncouth. His hand went belatedly to the rolled brim of his Stetson. The hat came off. He tried to master the strange, vibrant huskiness which had come into his voice.

But before he could speak she had spoken. Her lips had parted, smiling; she had held out her slim, tanned hand. "Thanks," she said simply; "you see—"

She didn't finish. In turning a second time to the girl, Jim had turned his back upon the heap at the foot of the stairs. But the girl, looking down the stairway over his shoulder, saw that heap stir to life, now. And Jim saw the sudden whiteness which

blanched the roses out of her tanned cheeks.

He whirled round. The stranger, whom he had thought senseless, had risen to one knee, a gun in his hand. Jim's right hand swept across his body for the ivory butt of the Colt special in his tallowed holster. But before he had jerked the gun free, the man at the foot of the steps had fired. A bullet whined as it whistled past Jim's ear. A second bullet struck the balustrade of the stairway to one side of him and ricocheted wildly.

And then Jim fired. His eye and the sight of his gun lined up on the other man's breast, he squeezed his trigger. There was a jet of flame, a blasting roar, and the unseen flight of a bullet. And it was over. The man at the foot of the stairway spun round crazily; his gun slipped from his fingers, and he fell sideways.

There was a moment of still hush, and then a hubbub. The girl's scream, the series of thuds which the stranger's body had made going down the stairs, had already drawn a horde from the bar into the hotel lobby. The horde had leaped for shelter at the bark of gun-fire. But now, with a rush, men emerged from behind tables, chairs, sofas. There was also a rush from the upstairs rooms of the hotel.

A score of guests arrived, *en masse*, at the second floor head of the staircase. And three men, who had formed a group there, halted only an instant, then rushed down the steps. Two—a pair with a resemblance strong enough to mark them as father and son—darted to the girl's side the instant they reached the landing. The third man came to a blinking halt and stared down the staircase. At the foot of the steps, someone rolled the stranger's body over and unbuttoned his bloody shirt.

Then the man who had halted, blinking, whirled upon Jim. And Jim beheld something which he could best describe as the face of a human being changing suddenly into the face of a devil, a sheer fiend! The countenance had been, a second ago, the tanned, ruddy, open face of the typical Westerner who, with middle age, has achieved a certain affluence, a certain look of well-being and contentment. In a flash it became a face so twisted in fury, so malevolently and malignantly contorted in evil, that Jim could scarcely credit his senses.

"You killed him?" the man rasped. The voice rose in a spasm of passion, and he repeated it in a scream, this time, "You killed him?"

Fright, like vindictiveness, was a strange emotion to Jim Vesper. But he felt his blood curdle. The man standing there was about to fly at his throat; about to tear him to pieces with his bare hands!

It happened otherwise. Jim hadn't, it appeared, killed the man at the foot of the steps. Two hunchers, who had come out of the bar, had by now lifted the girl's erstwhile annoyer to his feet. They had started toward the lobby door with him, and the man seemed able to navigate, to a certain extent, under his own power.

It was a performance which the man at Jim's side took in. The face lost its fury. Jim's challenger brushed bruskly past Jim, literally flung himself down the stairway, joined the exiting trio, and disappeared with them out into the twilight. And Jim stood there with the feeling that he had been reprieved from death. Reprieved, at any rate, from an attack by a man who would cheerfully, instantly, and in blind, unreasoning anger, have attempted to kill him.

HE felt a little shudder pass. He turned back to the girl and her two companions. But if any of the trio had witnessed what he had just witnessed, none of the three commented upon it. The girl was saying to the younger of the two men at her side, "Blame you, because Sid Trench was drunk and tried to kiss me, coming down the stairs? Why, of course

not. You're not responsible for your cousin's actions."

"Jest the same," said the young man, "if I'd knowed Sid was here in Flagville. . . ." The man's voice trailed; he turned to Jim. "Stranger," he said, his blue eyes very sober and earnest, "I'm mighty indebted to you. And if you jest heard Miss Paige say that Sid was my cousin, don't think for a minute I'm holdin' it against you for shootin' him. A lower renegade than Sid never lived."

The young man had held out a firm, bronzed hand as he spoke. Jim, as he took that hand, looked into a face as clean-cut as his own, but a half-dozen or so years younger. He saw a youth not quite so tall as himself and not quite so broad of shoulder, but a youth the tilt of whose chin was manly, who carried himself erect.

The boy went on, "Claiborne's my name—King Claiborne. This here's my dad, Bill. And I reckon I've already more or less introduced Miss Paige."

Jim held out his hand to the boy's father. "Pleased to meet you," he said. "I'm Jim Vesper, folks."

He broke off abruptly. For the thing was as sudden and as swift as that little scene of a couple of moments ago. A few moments before, he had seen the face of the man who had come down the stairs with the Claibornes, twist and contort in a trice into an expression of sheer, malevolent evil. Now he saw the faces of the girl, the boy, and the father all undergo changes of expression just as swift. The comparison ended there, however. It wasn't fury which came into the faces of the two men. And it wasn't fury certainly which came into the girl's face, but it was an emotion in its own way just as powerful. Surprise failed adequately to describe it. Nor was consternation exactly the word. The girl simply stood there, wordlessly, her blue eyes growing wide and large, her gaze riveting itself upon Jim and transfixing him.

"You—you say that you're Jim Vesper?" she demanded at last.

It was Jim's turn to be bewildered. His sense of awkwardness and embarrassment of a second ago returning to him, he stammered, "Why—why, yes'm, I—I'm Jim Vesper."

She seemed to catch her breath.

"But I'd expected you'd be so much older. So much nearer Father's age."

"You'd—" He let his voice trail helplessly. He simply stared at her.

There was a long-drawn-out moment of still, brittle hush. Then, abruptly, the girl reached out and took his hand. "But this isn't any way to treat you, of course," she said. "What I ought to be saying is how happy I am to see you. And I *am* happy, terribly happy to welcome any friend of—" her voice abruptly broke as emotion again mastered her for a second "—of my father."

She turned to the Claibornes. "We'll invite Jim Vesper down to supper with us, shall we? And I can tell him the rest of the story then."

Bill Claiborne and King both nodded. The girl, still holding Jim's hand, started on down the steps. And Jim followed at her side in a sort of trance. Paige? Paige? He knew her father? Or her father knew him? Well, he thought suddenly, it was conceivable. He'd wandered far, since he'd left home at seventeen. In his travels he might very well have met a man named Paige. But the meeting, the circumstances under which it might have taken place, eluded him.

His head buzzing, his bronzed forehead puckering as he strove to explore the archives of his memory, he heard the girl say to him as they reached the lobby, "You had Dad's letter, of course."

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I—"

She looked at him in surprise.

"You mean you just happened into town today? Not knowing Dad had sent for you? Not even knowing that Dad had been living only seventy

miles north of here, in Surprise Valley?"

They had reached the dining-room doorway, and a waiter was beckoning them to a table. Out of the corner of his eye, Jim stole a glance at the girl. And he reaffirmed all his superlatives of a second ago. She was—words failed him. She was lovely! And she was the daughter of some friend who'd known him well enough to send for him? But some friend whom he, in his turn, had hopelessly forgotten?

His speech was an apology from the depths of his soul. "I've drifted a lot in the past few years," he told her. "And sometimes I ain't left forwardin' addresses. So—so that'd account prob'ly for my not gittin' your dad's letter. And it'd account, in a way, for my not knowin' he was livin' in—where was it? Surprise Valley? I ain't never been one to correspond much with my friends."

She nodded as the four of them all sat down, now, at a center table. "I know. . . . That's what Dad said about you; that you weren't the sort that ever stayed in one place very long. The last address of yours he had, I think, was Caspar, Wyoming."

Jim's forehead puckered. Caspar? Well—he'd been in Wyoming, certainly. And maybe he'd been in Caspar. But the town somehow struck a void in his memory. He sat there staring at the girl, striving suddenly, by a new process of mental effort, to place her father. She ought presumably, he decided, to resemble the older man. There might be between her and this man Paige a trace of that strong family resemblance which he noticed between the two Claibornes.

His dark, probing eyes took her in. She had tawny hair and blue eyes, as he had already observed. She had, moreover, a very firm, aggressive chin; her features, delicately proportioned, hinted at breeding and refinement. So Paige had been what? Not riffraff, certainly. No, and probably not one of the muleteers or wagon bosses, but a rancher, a man of background and position.

The girl's voice brought him out of his thoughts. She was regarding him soberly, saying, "Well, since you didn't receive Dad's letter, I don't know quite where to begin. But Dad sent for you about six weeks ago. And as the days went by, and you didn't come and didn't come, he began to get more and more nervous and upset until finally—"

Her voice broke. Jim watched the elder of the two Claibornes abruptly reach across the table, cover the girl's hand with his. "There, Nancy," said the older man, "supposin' you let me tell it."

The man turned and addressed Jim. "Stan Paige needed you pretty bad when he sent for you, I reckon, Vesper," the old man said soberly. "He come in to Surprise Valley, six years ago, the same wealthy man he was when you knew him up North. He bought a ranch—a beauty—but he sunk more money in it than he should have. On top of that, I let him in for a little bit of financial grief, myself, I'm sorry to say.

"Surprise Valley's seventy-odd miles from here, you know. And it used to be that folks livin' there had to do all their bankin' here in Flagville. It was a danged inconvenient arrangement, to put it mildly. So, five years ago, I got Stan interested in helpin' me to organize a bank in Surprise Valley.

"We each put up a hundred thousand dollars, and neither of us has ever got a nickel out of it. Our bank's managed to stay solvent, but it ain't never paid a cent in profits, and prob'ly never will. In the final analysis, Surprise Valley's too small a community to support a bank profitably.

"So, as I say, Stan ended up ownin' a ranch that paid him danged little, and a thousand shares of bank stock that were payin' him nothin'. And at that point, he made the mistake of dabblin' in wild-cat minin' stocks. Got in deeper and deeper. You know how them things are. The gold's always

jest round the corner. One more assessment on the stockholders, and they'll find it sure. Only they never do.

"Stan spent all the money he had in the bank; he sold a half-interest in his ranch to a lawyer in town named Ace Hadley, and spent that money. And then, four-five months ago, he borrowed still more money from Hadley. That left him broke, at the time he wrote you. And whether he wrote you with the hope of gettin' your financial support, or whether it was support of a different sort he wanted from you, we don't know."

The man's voice trailed; he looked Jim in the eye, levelly. "But we do know this: Two weeks ago, Stan Paige wrote three letters, one night. One was to the sheriff in which he said his financial troubles had got the best of him and that he was goin' off to commit suicide—"

Jim felt himself start. This friend whom he'd forgotten had wanted to borrow money from him? And because the letter asking for the money hadn't reached him, his friend had done away with himself? Jim felt himself sway dizzily.

Bill Claiborne's voice resumed, "He left a letter to Nancy, here, sayin' practically the same thing. And he left a third letter for you, in case you ever turned up to receive it. Nancy has that letter with her, and I reckon you might as well have it, now."

In a daze, Jim watched the girl open her hand bag and take from it a Manila envelope. In a daze, he accepted the envelope; heard the girl explain, as he went to slit it, and found it already open. "We took the liberty of breaking the seals and reading it," she said, "because—well—Dad wrote me, and he wrote the sheriff, that he was committing suicide because he was in financial straights. But we thought maybe in his letter to you, he'd give the real reason."

Jim started. "The—"

"The real reason," she repeated. "Because I know Dad, and you know him. He was a fighter; he wasn't a quitter. And he'd never in a million years have let money worries hound him to his death. He was afraid of something, and it wasn't just that Ace Hadley held fifty thousand dollars' worth of his notes that he couldn't repay. It wasn't that he was going to lose the other half of his ranch to Ace. It was something—but we don't know yet what it really was, because all he said to you in your letter was the same thing he said to me, in mine."

Jim had taken from the envelope its single sheet of note paper as the girl had spoken. And he commenced reading, now:

"Dear Jim:

No word from you yet. And maybe there won't ever be any word from you. You may be dead, or you may be, for all I know, in the wilds of China. But I do know this: If you ever do receive my first letter, and it's humanly possible for you to come to Surprise Valley, you'll come. And I want to have this note waiting for you when you arrive. I'm riding off onto the desert tonight, on a journey from which I won't return. So long, old partner, and good luck.

"And now do something for me. You'll probably find Nancy living at the *Hacienda de Rosas*. Or she may be living with the Claibornes, friends of mine here, and thoroughly fine people.

"But in either case, the procedure is the same. In my letter to Nancy, I've asked her to marry you, the minute you arrive. And in my letter to you, I'm—"

Jim gripped the note paper. For the moment the scrawl leaped and danced, and he couldn't follow it. Surprise, tonight, had succeeded surprise. And this, of them all, was the weirdest! That some rancher for whom he had evidently once briefly worked in Wyoming should summon him to Surprise Valley, and tell him that his daughter had been instructed to marry him!

The little moment during which the lines of the letter blurred, spun itself out and out and out. It was only after an eternity, it seemed to Jim, that he was able to look back at the paper and commence reading where he had left off. Then he read:

"And in my letter to you, I'm making the same request. Marry Nancy and

take her away with you to the ends of the earth—Australia, South America, some utterly new frontier. This sounds wild, I know. And it may sound wilder when I refuse to make any explanations. But I mean it. And I don't reckon you'll hesitate. There was a night, once—remember it?—in the Silver Dollar Casino in Nome in Alaska, when I saved your life, and when you told me that if the time ever came when you could repay the favor, you'd do it. Well, this is your chance, Jim. Assure me, by taking Nancy out of this country, that the same forces which wrecked my life aren't going to wreck hers.

Stan."

Jim finished reading at last. His face crimson, he lifted his eyes, and looked falteringly into the clear, deep blue eyes of Nancy Paige.

The girl referred to the letter's amazing request only obliquely. She said quietly, "You see what I mean, now, do you, Jim Vesper? Dad speaks of forces which wrecked his life. And he hints that they might wreck mine if I stayed around here. That hardly refers to money, do you think, knowing Dad as you must have known him that year you were together in the Yukon?"

Jim managed slowly, with terrific effort, to find his voice. "I—I—gosh, Miss Paige," he commenced, "it's—it's danged difficult for me to explain. But I'm sorry. I mean—"

The girl's lips parted for an instant in the tiniest of smiles. "It's all right," she said. "And you don't really need to explain. I understand. You're either married, or you're in love, or, in any case, the idea of having to marry a stranger you've never laid eyes on until today is too much for you. I don't blame you. And I'll save you the embarrassment of an apology, because you're saving me the embarrassment of having to refuse you.

"You see, Jim Vesper, I'd made up my mind, a long time before you turned up, that Dad's request was unthinkable for either one of us. For you, because you couldn't be expected to want to marry me. And for me, because I couldn't be expected to race off to the ends of the earth with Dad's death unsatisfactorily explained. If some mysterious force wrecked his life, I want to find out what it was. And I want to punish the man or the men responsible for it. So—"

"But that ain't what I mean," Jim protested, "my not wantin' to marry you. Because if I *was* Jim Vesper, and felt I was worthy of you, I'd be willin'—I mean, I'd be glad to marry you, Miss Paige. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart. But what I'm tryin' to say is that I ain't Jim Vesper."

It was a pronouncement which brought the boy, King Claiborne, to his feet. "What's that?" the youth demanded. "You say you ain't Jim Vesper? And yet you've had the calm, cold, cast-iron nerve to set here and let us—"

Jim gave the boy no heed. It was the girl, staring at him now in bewilderment, whom he wished to placate. "My tongue's twisted," he said. "And I ain't sayin' this right, even yet, Miss Paige. I—I *am* Jim Vesper, of course. But I ain't the Jim Vesper your dad had in mind. If I've listened to more of your personal affairs than I've had any right to listen to, I'm sorry.

"But I figgered, to begin with, that I might have knowed your dad. I wasn't quite so sure as things went on, but I still hoped I was the Jim Vesper he'd meant, because—well, because if you needed me, I wanted to be of help. You see? But I know now that your dad's friend was somebody else. He speaks, and you speak, of our knowin' each other in Alaska. And I've never been to Alaska.

"Your dad's referrin' prob'ly to some distant relative of mine that I've never met. James—Jim—is a traditional name in the Vesper family, you see. The first Vesper who come to this country with the Pilgrim fathers was named James. And I reckon I ain't the only member of the family to've been named after him. I'm Jim, and so's this fourth or fifth, or eighth or ninth cousin of mine, that your father knew."

He broke off. King Claiborne, who had risen so touchily and truculently, had sat down. Nancy Paige was regarding him smilingly. "That explains it, of course," the girl said. She added, "And it simplifies it, too, doesn't it?"

He looked at her. "Simplifies it?"

"Doesn't it? I mean—neither you nor I has to ponder or wonder now over what he's going to do. You haven't been jerked out of the normal course of your life to look after some girl you've never seen before today and might not like. And I don't have to explain to you that, regardless of Dad's plans, I've made my own plans for the future. It's just as if we'd met in the normal way. You did me a favor on the stairway; I've thanked you for it, and—"

She didn't finish, but it seemed to Jim as if she were saying, "And now it's good-by."

He felt a sudden twinge of—what? Disappointment? Disappointment, it was; let-downness. He'd hit Flagville looking for excitement. And here, for a second, had been the prospect of excitement beyond his wildest dreams. He'd meant it with the utmost of sincerity when he'd said he'd wanted to be of help.

He cleared his throat. "Jest the same, Miss Paige," he said, "if there's anythin' I could do for you—"

She shook her head. "It's sweet of you to offer. But I reckon there's nothing. Nothing, probably, that the real Jim Vesper could have done, once I'd told him I couldn't marry him. No, this is something I've got to face myself and in my own way. And if the time ever comes when I need help—" she turned to the old man and the boy —"why, I've got King and Bill, here."

Jim said no more. There seemed no more to say. The waiter appeared with their desserts and their coffee, and they finished their meal. Then they rose, went into the lobby. And Jim, though he would have liked to follow them into one of the small ladies' sitting-rooms where they went as a group, excused himself. For an hombre, no matter how much he wanted to see more of a girl, couldn't obtrude his presence beyond the limits of good taste. He stood there at the doorway of the ladies' parlor, watched the three walk in and sit down. Then at last, belatedly, he made his way to the bar.

CHAPTER II

Guns of Death

IT was curious, Jim Vesper thought as he stepped into the barroom and approached the brass rail so crowded with laughing, jovial men. He'd come down the main staircase a little over an hour ago, tingling with excitement, prepared to take Flagville apart and see what made it tick. Yet he no longer felt that urge, now. Two or three quick drinks here? Two or three more at the Golden Slipper on down the street? Then a whirl at the roulette tables at the Casino, and a couple of dances with the girls of the Blue Moon? He shook his head. Who wanted to dance with the girls of the Blue Moon after spending an hour in the presence of a girl like Nancy Paige?

He made his way to the bar, ordered simply a beer, and stood there lingering over it. Twenty minutes later he was sipping a second when someone at his elbow spoke his name, "Vesper?"

Jim turned; suffered a sudden, unpleasant shock. At his side stood the man who had come down the stairs with the Claibornes; the man who had gone into such a spasm of fury following Jim's shooting of Sid Trench. Jim put down his drink. Unconsciously his right hand slipped beneath the bar to a spot where it could instantly and conveniently sweep across his body to the ivory butt of the Colt in his left holster.

"Yeah," he said quietly, "I'm Vesper."

The stranger held out his hand. "Then I'm mighty pleased to meet

you." The eyes which, there on the stairway, had been the cold, gray eyes of the killer, were blue, bright, jovial. "Happened to be glancin' over the hotel register to see if a friend of mine had checked in yet, and I saw your name. Asked the clerk to point you out to me, and he showed you to me while you was eatin' dinner with my friends, the Claibornes and Miss Paige. Hadley's my name—Ace Hadley."

Jim had come out of the nostalgic, wistful feeling which had gripped him ever since dinner, and he stood there at rigid, tense, tingling attention. Hadley? Why Hadley was the name of the man to whom the girl's father had sold a half-interest in his ranch; the name of the man who still held Paige's unpaid notes for fifty thousand dollars. And that meant?

What it meant, Jim couldn't say. But it gave him a most disturbing feeling—no matter how jovial Hadley appeared now—to think of the devil on the stairway as the partner of the girl's father, and to think of him, consequently, as now being the girl's partner. Jim felt the back of his neck freeze.

Meantime, Ace Hadley's voice went on: "I knew Paige had sent for you, of course, because he told me he was writin' you. But all of us—me, the Claibornes, Miss Nancy's other friends—had about given up hope of your gettin' here. Showed up today, huh? And by a coincidence run into all of us here in Flagville instead of havin' to go clear into Surprise Valley to find us! Well, I'm mighty glad to meet you, Vesper. Mighty glad! Any friend of Stan Paige's is a friend of mine."

To the accompaniment of the voice, Jim felt his hand being heartily shaken. The voice died away; Ace Hadley released his hand. And like an automaton, Jim let it drop back to his side.

"I see," Jim said. "Well, I'll tell you, Hadley—" He broke off abruptly. He had intended to make the same simple, honest confession to Hadley that he had made to the girl; to tell the man that he wasn't the Jim Vesper who had been Paige's friend. But on the spur of the moment he heard himself saying, instead, "Well, I'll tell you, Hadley, I'm as glad to meet you as you are to meet me."

Nor did he know exactly why he had allowed himself to be cast, this time, in the rôle which he had once denied. The thing was intangible. It amounted to no more, perhaps, than a sudden wish on his part not to shut the man up. Hadley had quite obviously sought him out to talk about the girl and her father. The girl had dismissed him from her scheme of things. But Jim hadn't been able, since talking with her, to dismiss her from his. Any additional information which Hadley gave him would be upon a subject in which his curiosity had already been deeply aroused.

It might have been that. But it was that plus something else at the same time. He not only wished to have the conversation turn to Nancy Paige, but he wished also to have the opportunity to size up Ace Hadley. The man had gone into a spasm of fury when Jim had shot the renegade who'd been annoying Nancy. Yet now the same man by his manner and speech proclaimed himself the girl's friend. Here was something which couldn't be dropped, dismissed.

At any rate, then, and for whatever the reasons, Jim spoke as he did. Hadley smiled, turned to the bartender and ordered drinks. Jim, as tensely excited as a few moments previously he had been let-down, became the Jim Vesper of the Yukon days.

The drinks arrived; Hadley downed his, and said casually, "Stan's letter must have come to you as somethin' of a shock, didn't it?"

Jim faltered, "You mean his first letter?"

Hadley nodded. "I mean his first letter—the one in which he told you

what a jam he was in, and asked you to come help him."

Jim hesitated, a little unsure of his ground. Deny that first letter, and tell Hadley that he had turned up here today by mere chance? He shook his head. Mere chance was too hard to explain. Better, if he were assuming the rôle at all, to assume it whole hog. "Yep," he said slowly, "it did, all right. Upset me especially because I received it so long after he wrote it. I wasn't in Caspar, you know. It had to be forwarded two-three times and was delayed."

"He told you in that first letter," Hadley went on, "the same things we all know, I reckon. I mean about his speculatin' in minin' stock and bein' broke. He didn't say anythin' else, did he?"

For a second time, Jim wasn't quite certain of himself. Had Hadley seen that first letter before it had been mailed, and was he putting him to a test? Or was Hadley attempting to pump him? Trying to find out something which the man didn't know, but would like to know? Jim took the easiest way out. "That's all he told me," he said. "About his speculatin'. Oh, and he did hint, in a way, that there was some urgent reason for my comin' here in person instead of jest sendin' him money, but he—"

Hadley's voice was eager, "But he didn't say what that somethin' was?"

Jim shook his head. "He didn't say."

It seemed to Jim that an expression of relief momentarily crossed the face of the man who had been Stan Paige's partner.

Hadley smiled broadly. "I jest wondered," he said. "The only reason I ask, of course, is this: Poor Miss Nancy's been so certain her father couldn't have committed suicide jest because he was broke that I, as her partner and her friend, have tried to run down one-two other leads. They ain't got nowhere, and I don't reckon they will. If there really was somethin' else in the picture, you're the one man in the world he'd have taken into his confidence. And since he didn't mention nothin' else to you, why—" Hadley spread his palms upward in a shrug.

With that, Hadley's conversation turned to small talk, and over Jim came the realization that the discussion, to all practical intents and purposes, was at an end. Hadley, after having asked his questions and received his answers, had no further wish to discuss either Stan Paige or Nancy.

Jim didn't force the issue. He downed his drink, offered to buy Hadley one, and then turned away. He took a single step. Then, attempting to be just as casual as Hadley had been, he abruptly turned back.

"Oh, jest one thing, before we say good night, Hadley," he said. "How's your friend?"

Ace Hadley's forehead puckered. "Friend?"

"Sid Trench," Jim told him; "you know—the man I shot."

What reaction he had expected from Hadley, he didn't know. But the one he got was one which surprised him. Hadley burst suddenly into deep, booming laughter. "Oh, Trench—Bill Claiborne's young renegade nephew. Sure—sure, I know who you mean, now. You're the hombre I met there on the stairway, ain't you? Whole danged incident had plumb slipped my mind till you reminded me. And now, danged if I don't owe you an apology.

"Know what happened? I come down the steps there, after a little parley with the Claibornes up there in their room, and I reckon my eyes wasn't quite yet adjusted to the bright lights of the lobby after settin' around in the dusk, upstairs. Anyway, I mistook Trench for—for somebody else. Didn't know what had called for the shootin'; saw Trench lyin' there, and mistook him for another young man who's quite near an' dear to me. I blew up; hit the roof, I reckon. And you can imagine my relief and—at the

same time—embarrassment, when I got to the hospital and found out my mistake. Hell—Trench, he ain't no friend of mine. And I only wish to God you'd killed him instead of hittin' a deck of stacked cards in his pocket and jest woundin' him."

The man's voice was so warm, so reassuring, moreover, that Jim walked out of the bar and back into the lobby, his forehead puckering beneath the rolled brim of his Stetson. So that was that, was it, he asked himself. A case of mistaken identity? Hadley had blown up, thinking that Jim had shot somebody else? And now that he discovered Jim's victim to be the worthless, renegade Trench, he didn't care a hang?

Well, thought Jim, his feeling of disappointment returning to him, a promising hunch had gone to hell. But that was life, he guessed. He was, he was afraid, an incorrigible and an incurable romantic, at times. Tonight, for a brief moment, he had dramatized himself as a hero of fiction. Here was the girl in distress. Here was the wicked and evil partner, Ace Hadley, revealing himself through his friendship for Sid Trench. And here was he, Jim Vesper, ready to unmask Ace, prove that the suicide had been a murder; that the suicide notes had been forged; that Ace, the crooked partner, had cheated the girl's father out of his ranch, and then killed the man.

But it didn't work out that way. Hadley and Trench weren't friends. If the suicide notes had been forged, they'd have undoubtedly been revealed as forgeries before this. Ace Hadley had bought and not cheated his way into possession of half the girl's ranch. "And," thought Jim, "on top of all that, the gal told you in so many words that if a hero turned out to be necessary, they was two other gents already picked out to play the part."

HE looked in at the doorway of the ladies' parlor, where, earlier in the evening, he had left Nancy Paige and the Claibornes. The parlor was empty. The desk clerk called across the room to him, "If you're lookin' for your friends, they all went upstairs early. They're leavin' at the crack of dawn for Surprise Valley."

"I see," Jim said. And so saying, he turned and slowly mounted the grand stairway. They were leaving, the clerk had said, at the crack of dawn tomorrow. Well—that meant that he'd see her only once more, very briefly, perhaps, at breakfast. He tried to grin philosophically, but somehow didn't succeed.

After he had taken off the finery which he had put on for the binge which had never taken place, he couldn't, for some reason, go to sleep. Again and again two blue eyes regarded him in awesome wonder. Yes, and again and again he saw Ace Hadley's face. Saw it, moreover, not as it had looked down there in the bar just now—bland and jovial—but as it had looked there on the stairway—twisted and contorted in evil.

How long he lay there with his thoughts, Jim wasn't certain. He knew simply that gradually the street noises outside died away to nothingness. The tinkle of the orchestras from the dance halls became silent. There were no more raucous shouts of the town's roisterers. He could hear the tick of the silver watch which he had placed on a chair beside his bed.

Then the hush of the night was blasted by the roar of a gun. And Jim sat bolt upright. The revolver had seemed to bark in his very ear. He knew abruptly, a split second later as his feet hit the floor and he dived into trousers and boots and scooped gun and cartridge belt from the chair beside his bed, that the weapon hadn't even been fired in the same room with him. The reverberations of the shot and a moan came to him through the partition which separated his room from the adjoining one.

He flung himself out into the hall, thundered upon the adjoining door.

"Hey, you, in there!" But no one answered, and the door refused to give when he tried its knob. He waited no longer. Stepping back, he hurled himself at the portal.

It splintered, gave with his second onslaught, and he crashed into the room. A dim hall light, suspended by a chain from the ceiling of the corridor outside, streamed into the chamber past him. In a trice, Jim took in the scene.

Standing in the center of the room, in pajamas, a gun in his hand, stood the young man with whom he had eaten dinner, King Claiborne! To one side of King, sprawled the length of one-half of a huge double bed, lay the boy's father, dead! The bullet, whose roar had brought Jim to his feet and into the adjoining room, had blown off very nearly the whole top of Bill Claiborne's head!

Sheer horror transfixed Jim for the moment. But it was a tableau which held him only for the tiniest fraction of a second. For, as Jim's horror-stricken eyes took in the scene, King, who had been standing there swaying groggily as if drunk, seemed to emerge from a sort of daze. The gun in his hand came up. An orange cone of fire leaped at Jim. A bullet missed striking his ribs by a hair's breadth, and buried itself, splintering the woodwork, in the door-jamb beside him.

His own gun, Jim held there in his hand. Whether he simply forgot its presence there, or whether he hesitated to hurl lead at a man with whom he had just broken bread, Jim never knew. He knew simply that before the young man could fire at him a second time, he had leaped forward.

The top of his head struck the younger man in the pit of the stomach. Simultaneously he locked his strong arms about King Claiborne's knees, and brought the man's head down upon the floor with a resounding bang. But neither the bang on the head nor the blow in the stomach seemed in the least to subdue his quarry. With the savage, panther-like twist of a cornered wildcat, King Claiborne rolled over. Jim reached for the wrist of the hand holding the gun; caught it, twisted it. The fingers of one hand released their grip upon the weapon. But with a second twist, Claiborne sat up in a position from which he could hurl a fist.

Hard, bony knuckles, packing power which made Jim suck in his breath in sudden pain, crashed to the side of his jaw. King leaped to his feet, and Jim simultaneously to his. The boy came at him with a lunge, and there, in the feeble light still shining in from the hall, Jim saw a face pale and set and grim as a maniac's. Jim side-stepped the rush, aimed a fist for the boy's jaw, missed, tripped, as his own rush took him forward. He sank to one knee, and before he could lift himself, King Claiborne, with the savage roar of an animal, was upon him. Fighting like a man possessed, with no thought of Marquis of Queensbury rules, the boy kicked him in the stomach as he struggled to rise. Then the boy knocked him to the floor, and two hands, with fingers like steel, leaped for his throat.

Jim managed to double his knees up beneath him. He planted both his feet in the stomach of the man on top of him. And then, though the boy had by now completely shut off the breath in his windpipe, he drove both legs upward. The fingers which had been throttling him came free, scratching his neck with their nails. Jim hurled the boy backward, away from him, as if he had shot him from a catapult. And in doing so, he hurled him directly into the path of a half-dozen men just charging into the room.

The leaders of the approaching mob tripped, fell over the boy and went down on top of him. Jim climbed groggily to his feet.

The next was a series of swift, blurred impressions. From the bottom of the pile where King Claiborne lay, there came a burst of frenzied expostulation. "Let me up, you damn fools!

Let me at him! He killed my father, and by heaven—" The voice was lost amid the cries of dismay from those in the rear of the crowd, who were just catching sight of Bill Claiborne's body. There was a rush and a human avalanche which buried Jim, himself, this time. Jim found he had not one madman to battle, but a dozen. A boot, a heel, something, clipped him on the temple. And that was all he remembered for several minutes.

When he came to, Jim found himself stretched out upon the floor, one man at his side forcing brandy between his lips, a second man standing over him, pointing a gun down at him. Across the room, two men holding him in a chair, sat King Claiborne. Standing in front of King, his hands akimbo on his hips, was Ace Hadley.

And Hadley was saying, "Quit shoutin' at me, and tell your story from the beginnin'. What happened?"

Still groggy, Jim sat up. He watched King Claiborne fling his head up defiantly. "I tell you he killed my father," the boy cried. "That's what happened! I woke up with the feelin' somebody was in the room here. But before I could git out of bed to investigate, somethin', a gun muzzle or a black-jack, cracked me over the head. I fell back; there was a shot. I staggered outa bed half-blind, and then I seen Dad dead, and Vesper standin' there in the door of the room. I took a shot at him, and missed him. He come at me and knocked me down, and—" The voice broke passionately. "Hell, you know what happened, Hadley."

Hadley said, "Yep, I think I know."

Over Jim, for the moment, flooded a feeling of sheer eeriness. Hadley, the rest of them, all believed this wild story of King Claiborne's?

He leaped to his feet. But before he could cry out or protest, Hadley had turned to him. The man's face was grim and set. He wore no longer his jovial expression of downstairs at the bar. But on the other hand, there was no hint of that malice or evil, which, upon still another occasion, Jim had seen in the countenance. Hadley said quietly, "And now, Vesper, we'll have your story. Or would you rather wait and tell it to the sheriff? He's on the way over."

Jim cleared his throat. He had no objections, he had every wish in the world, to tell his story now. "Why," he commenced. And then straightforwardly, as simply as he could, he gave his version of what happened.

There was a little silence when he had finished. He saw Hadley turn to the crowd. "Well, boys," said Hadley slowly, "the situation apparently boils down to this: We caught the two of them battlin' here in the room. There ain't no third person involved, because no third person rushed outa the room as we come down the hall." He walked to the window. "No third person could've jumped outa here without breakin' his neck. And there don't seem to be no third person under the bed nor in—" he opened a closet door—"nor in here. That's the picture, then. One or the other's guilty. Claiborne accuses Vesper, out an' out. Vesper don't accuse young Claiborne, but he says he found him standin' in the middle of the room with a smokin' gun in his hand. That bein' the case, the problem is simply which story do we believe!"

There was a second silence. Then a man in a pongee night shirt spoke up. "Hadley," he said quietly, "you know who I am. I'm the Claiborne foreman; I'm here in Flagville, you're here, we're all here, because we're friends an' neighbors back home—because we all drove our herds here to the railroad junction in one big outfit. My loyalties, your loyalties, too, I reckon, are to King, as a friend. But God help me, I've got to tell the truth.

"I had the room next to Bill an' King's tonight. The first shot woke me up, and I was awake for the rest. And—and that door went down with its crash *after* the shot was fired. In other

words, Vesper's tellin' the truth, and young King ain't."

"Well," said Hadley quietly, "that settles it then. Huh, folks?"

No one had the opportunity to answer, for in that second Nancy Paige suddenly appeared upon the threshold of the room. Jim saw her glance at the blood-stained sheet which now covered Bill. He saw her hand go to her forehead, saw her commence to sway. In a flash, no longer mindful of the gun still covering him, he made a leap to get to her side. He caught her in his arms, steadied her. Whether she realized who he was or not, he couldn't tell. For her gaze had fixed itself, not upon him, but upon King Claiborne across the room, and she was staring at King like a person in a trance. Jim's eyes followed hers.

King had risen. For days and days afterward, Jim was to think back to every move, every motion which the boy then made. He had leaped to his feet at Ace Hadley's calm, "That settles it, then. Huh, folks?" And then he had seemed to freeze in his tracks. He stood there like a stone statue, like a man wavering upon the brink of a paralytic stroke. The jaw muscles of his ash-white face moved slowly; his mouth opened and closed wordlessly. Then his voice came, a strangled, sobbing cry, "You mean—you mean you think *I* killed him? My own father?"

It was a cry which recorded itself indelibly upon Jim's mind. That was what they all did think, now, of course. It was what he, himself, was compelled to think. But the sheer, stark agony in the boy's voice wrenched his soul to the depths.

He stood there so emotionally shaken that he scarcely saw the start of the next. But the boy broke loose from the two men holding him; he came at Ace Hadley with a sudden, savage rush. "Damn you," he cried. "Damn you, you can't say that!" He reached Ace; lashed out with a fist.

Jim saw Ace Hadley nimbly sidestep. The fist swished past his cheek. Hadley simultaneously lifted a blow of his own, and the boy went down at its impact like a pole-axed steer.

And all in the same second, Jim felt the girl, there in his arms, tear herself free. She rushed forward, dropped to the boy's side. She slipped her arm under King Claiborne's waist, got his head and shoulders up into her arms. And then, flinging back her tawny head, looking up, and transfixing Ace Hadley with her blue eyes, she cried, "Why you—you bully! You loathsome coward!"

Hadley shrugged. With the gesture, so cold, so lacking in feeling, Jim abruptly hated the man. Hated him for no reason which had its roots in logic. The man had just helped to exonerate him, and he should have been grateful. But the girl hated him, and he hated him, too.

"And what would you have had me do?" Hadley asked. "He jest killed one man. Should I have let him kill me, too?"

"He didn't," the girl cried, "and you know he didn't."

"Well, it's a choice," said Hadley, "between him and your dad's old friend, Jim Vesper."

Jim watched the girl's eyes shift, meet his, stare at him in bewilderment.

And Ace went on, "And we've already cleared Vesper. But we'll put the thing to one final test, if you like, before we call it quits. We ain't examined their guns yet. Somebody hand me Vesper's."

A man moved forward with the gun and cartridge belt which had been taken from Jim. Hadley broke the weapon, squinted at it. "Barrel's been cleaned," he said, "since Vesper shot Sid Trench. Five unfired bullets in the chamber. Now we'll look at young King's."

There was a moment's hush. The blue eyes which had been fixed upon Jim in bewildered surprise regarded Ace Hadley. Hadley took King's gun

from the hand of one of the others. And after breaking it as he had broken Jim's, he said, "Barrel's dirty—three chambers fired. Allowin' for one chamber always bein' empty as a precaution, there's one for the bullet he put into his dad, and another for the one he fired at Jim Vesper."

It was a complete and final exoneration of himself, Jim knew. But he had ceased to think of himself. He simply stood there, his heart flowing out upon increasing waves of tenderness and pity to the girl, who, by the expression on her face, had evidently wanted so desperately to believe in young King Claiborne's innocence. She loved him? Or had the kiss she'd given him simply been a sister's kiss? It hardly mattered, he thought.

He watched Ace Hadley bend down, touch the girl's shoulder. "Best leave King to us, Miss Nancy," he said, "till the sheriff gits here."

The girl didn't move.

Hadley repeated his command, "I said, you'd better go back to your room." And the man started forcibly to lift the girl to her feet.

Jim emerged from what, ever since the girl's appearance and the boy's passionate denial of his father's murder, had been a sort of daze. He reached Hadley's side in a bound. "Supposin' you take your paws off her, and let her do it her way," he commanded.

Hadley turned. "Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

They faced each other for a second. For a second the turquoise blue of Hadley's eyes seemed to dim off to gray. Then, a second time, the man shrugged. "It don't really matter, of course," he said. "I jest thought she'd be spared some of the harrowin' details if she went back to her room. But if she wants to stay here and watch the sheriff drag Claiborne away, it's nothin' to me, naturally."

So the girl stayed at King Claiborne's side until the sheriff arrived, and Jim stayed with her.

CHAPTER III

Jim Takes a Hand

FIFTEEN minutes passed. The sheriff had left with his prisoner. Ace Hadley had accompanied the pair. A deputy of the sheriff's had locked and sealed the Claiborne room. And Jim stood there in the hallway outside the locked door beside Nancy Paige.

She seemed to become really aware of him for the first time. They had come out the doorway together, she still tense and unseeing. But she turned, now, and was regarding him. "And it's true," she asked him, "that story that Ace Hadley just asked you to repeat to the sheriff—that when you broke down the door, you found King standing there with a gun in his hand?"

He would have given his soul, somehow, to have been able to tell her that it wasn't true. For it was a denial for which her eyes were obviously begging. But he was forced to say, "It's true, I'm afraid. That's the way I found him."

He saw her wince. "But it's so—so—" she seemed for a moment unable to find the word properly to express her feelings "—so utterly inconceivable," she finished. Her cheeks took on a little flush. "You don't know King, of course. You don't know any of us, for that matter. But King was—" Words again failed her.

Jim nodded. "It does seem—well, I don't know the right word, either. But I did see King there at dinner tonight with you and his dad. And if you'd asked me to go over the folks I'd met since arrivin' here, he's the last hombre on earth I'd have picked as a murderer. I can think of—well, at least two others I'd have elected ahead of him."

He added, "He was pretty close to you, I take it?"

It was a more personal question than he had any right to ask, perhaps. But he asked it with no thought of prying idly into her affairs, and she seemed to accept it in the spirit in which he'd asked it.

"He was," she said quietly, "he and his father both. Dad and Bill were neighbors, and then they were business partners in their bank, in town. And I've known King ever since we moved from Wyoming to Surprise Valley. Why, he took me to my first party, Jim Vesper. And the only time I ever saw him want to hurt anybody was—was a time like tonight when you came to my rescue. Sid Trench, his cousin, was annoying me once at a dance, and King knocked him down. I saw his eyes blaze then, and he looked as if he could have killed Sid. But the rest of the time. . . . You don't know how sweet he's been to me since Dad disappeared; so thoughtful, so considerate. I don't think a day's passed that he, or his father, or both of them haven't ridden over to the *Hacienda de Rosas* to see how I was getting along."

She added, and it came in the same breath, "I've never been able to see why Dad kept objecting to him."

Jim felt himself start. "You say your dad objected to King Claiborne?"

He saw her color crimson. "I shouldn't have said that," she said, "because it gives you the wrong impression, right away. But since I let it slip out without thinking, I'd better explain. Dad didn't really object to King. As I told you, Bill was his partner in the bank, and he liked Bill, and liked King, too. Used to say again and again that he thought King was fine. But he did object a little—in a way—to my going with King so much.

"He said—" she regarded Jim very soberly, very intently "—that he didn't mind my knowing King as a friend, but that he hoped I'd never get fond of him and want to marry him. He said there must be bad blood in the Claiborne family somewhere, or Sid Trench, King's cousin, wouldn't have turned out so badly."

Her voice rose defensively. "But that's silly, because everybody knows it was Sid's father and not his mother —who was Bill's sister—that was no good. And anyway, even if there was some black-sheep Claiborne ancestor clear back, it wouldn't mean that King, brought up to be fine and good and noble, would some day, and for no reason at all, suddenly go beserk, would it?"

Inwardly, but giving no outward sign, Jim caught his breath. He wondered whether the girl realized how what she was saying was suddenly damning King Claiborne. Some sudden, inherited urge to go beserk? Was that possibly the explanation of the gun there in the boy's hand tonight? Had the girl's father, shrewder than the girl, seen that hidden trait in young Claiborne? Was that the explanation of his request: "Marry her, Jim Vesper, and take her away to some new frontier." Marry her, in other words, before she gets too fond of King Claiborne, and take her away where she'll never see the boy again. Jim's forehead puckered. The idea only half clicked, somehow.

While he puzzled over it, the girl went on, "But that's neither here nor there, Dad's unreasonable objection to King. The problem, now, is— Look, Jim Vesper, they can't convict King on —on just the evidence they've got against him, now, can they? I mean—what if you did find him waving a gun? Couldn't he have reached for his gun when—when that man hit him over the head? Couldn't one chamber of that gun already have been empty following his shooting a jack-rabbit or something, yesterday, while we were all herding our cattle here to Flagville? Couldn't he have accused you the way he did—not because he wanted to shift the blame, the way they think, but because he honestly thought you were guilty? I mean—he was groggy when he jumped out of bed. He didn't see the real murderer escape. It took him several minutes to recover his senses, and when he did recover them, why—his eyes lit on you."

Her voice was so eager that Jim failed to find it in his heart to point out to her that from the very start the

choice of guilt had rested between two persons only—himself and young King; that no third person could possibly have been involved.

He said simply, "Well, they ain't got no motive for his committin' the deed, Miss Paige. That's one thing in his favor. The crime as it stands is—we'll call it senseless. It ain't got no meanin'. And it's sometimes danged hard to convict a man unless it can be showed why he wanted to commit his crime."

He saw her brighten. The sudden sparkle which came into her eyes went to his head like strong wine. He heard himself suddenly adding, "I'll tell you what I'll do, if you like. I'll git in touch with the best lawyer here in Flagville, tomorrow. I'll git him to appear with King at the preliminary hearin'. And maybe if we harp on that point—show that King's always been fine an' noble, as you say—and point out, furthermore, that even the lowest scum o' the earth don't shoot a father while he's lyin' in bed, asleep an' defenseless—why, there's a chance we could make the rest o' the evidence seem weak in comparison."

Her voice, like her eyes, brightened. "Would you? Could you get him a lawyer, Jim Vesper? You see, I—" She broke off. "But I haven't any right to ask you this," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because—well—it's just like I told you downstairs at dinner. You're not Dad's old partner. You don't owe Dad anything; and you don't owe me anything. I haven't the right to ask you to get mixed up in my affairs."

Jim grinned softly. "Is everythin' on this earth done on a basis of what somebody owes somebody else? Shucks, ma'am. That'd be a pretty cold-blooded way of folks actin', it strikes me. Now jest forgit it. It ain't good form I know, to mention money. But I happen to've hit town, tonight, with a wad. I'd intended on blowin' a certain amount of it in on enjoyin' myself. And if this is my idea of enjoyin' myself, why shouldn't I? I'm goin' to make the rounds of Flagville in the mornin'—hear? And I'm goin' to hire your friend the cleverest lawyer here. What's more, you ain't goin' to worry about it."

He saw her hesitate a moment, and he knew the thoughts that were rushing through here head. Speaking of her father, there at dinner, she'd said, "This is my own problem and I've got to solve it in my own way." She was the type that, with a problem which pertained only to herself, would never have asked aid or assistance. But the original dilemma in which he had found her had altered itself. Her father was dead and out of the picture, except insofar as she had the purely personal urge to avenge his death. King Claiborne was alive, and his life might depend, perhaps, upon the haste with which some attempt was made to belittle the evidence against him. She was balancing her personal pride, consequently, against her affection for King.

Jim made it as easy as possible for her to come to the decision to which he knew in advance she inevitably must come. He took her arm, commenced steering her down the hallway toward wherever her room was. He said gently, "And don't think I'm doin' this jest on account of you, if that bothers you. I'm doin' it jest as much for young Claiborne. Somethin' in the way he lashed into Ace Hadley, there, when Ace was accusin' him, sorta got me. Danged if it didn't!"

They had reached the head of the stairs leading downward from the fourth floor as he spoke. The girl had started to lead the way down, when she abruptly jumped back. There on the landing below them a man's form loomed up out of the shadows. The form came on into the light; the girl recovered from the start which the figure had given her, and they both recognized Ace Hadley.

The man lifted his hat as he passed them. "Had a nice long chat, did

you?" he asked. "Well, that's fine, Vesper. Glad you've comfortin' the girl. Glad you're here to look after her."

The man swept on, and Jim turned and stared after him. And he wondered—what had Hadley meant? Had the man meant what he'd seemed to mean on the surface, or had his tone been mocking, sneering? Jim's forehead knit for a second. Hadley bobbed up everywhere, apparently.

The little moment of Jim's pondering passed. He turned back to Nancy. They descended one more flight of steps to the hotel's second floor corridor, and there Jim saw the girl to the door of her room. She started inside, then turned back.

"Jim Vesper," she asked him suddenly, "what did Ace mean, saying up there in the room that you were my father's old friend?"

Jim flushed crimson. "Why, I—" Fumblingly, he explained. "He made the same mistake about my name that you did. And I—I reckon I didn't correct him."

"Why?"

"Why—" He fumbled again. "Why, I dunno. I had a wild, crazy hunch, there for a minute—it don't make no sense, I know—but I thought he might be mixed up in your dad's disappearance. And so I—well—"

He went on floundering, waiting for her to take him to task for meddling. But she didn't. That he had meddled, she skipped over; completely ignored it, as if the thought, crowded out by something else, hadn't even occurred to her. "And what," she asked, suddenly breathless, "made you think that?"

He shook his head. "What's any hunch founded on? Little things, intangible impressions that are too weak to be evidence, but that're too strong to put out of your head. I dunno."

"Well, that's curious," she said suddenly, "because—well, I haven't anything more to go on than you have, I reckon. Just little things, intangible impressions, the fact that from the first day I met Ace Hadley, I never liked him. But I've wondered, too, ever since Dad disappeared, whether Ace had anything to do with it. But I've never dared breathe that thought even to the Claibornes because it sounded so—so silly."

She stood there a second in rather awed silence. Then, if there'd been anything else she was going to say, she apparently thought better of it. For she simply held out her hand. "Well, good night, Jim Vesper. And—and thanks."

Jim very slowly retraced his steps upstairs to his room. He undressed a second time; climbed a second time into bed. And a second time, he found it impossible to sleep. He lay there considering what she'd said to him about Ace Hadley. He lay there going back, detail by detail, over the murder in the next room. He reviewed, in the sober light of afterthought, his impulsive promise to hire the best lawyer in town for King Claiborne. And he smiled sheepishly. Wild, was it? Well, it was wild on the surface of things; taken at its face value. His own exoneration stood up only when the murder was in turn pinned on King, and he ought logically to be the last person in the world to attempt to upset the apple cart. But she was fond of King, and he wanted to assist her. It was as simple as all that.

He'd found the opportunity at last to help her fight her battle. The situation had altered, to be sure. The battle he was fighting, now, wasn't the one he'd wanted to fight. But it was something. The sheepishness left Jim's smile. The irony of the situation—that if he managed to clear King Claiborne, he would, by returning to the girl her chosen champion, lose his own job as champion—failed to occur to him. His smile became a grin.

He arose finally. As the sunlight commenced to stream in the window, he got up and dressed. Not in his

Sunday clothes, but in clean, sober, practical work togs—blue jeans like those in which he had ridden into Flagville; blue shirt, leather vest. He left his room, descended to the lobby, strolled into the dining-room. Nancy Paige sat alone at a corner table for two. He didn't quite dare to walk over to her and ask permission to sit down opposite her. But he did stop at her side to say good morning. He gave her the opportunity to ask him to sit down, and she asked him.

CHAPTER IV

The Motive

SINCE he had hit Flagville at dusk the night before, life for Jim Vesper had been a series of adventures. The pace of those adventures slackened, now, for a few hours. He ate his breakfast with Nancy Paige, uneasily self-conscious of his table manners. Following breakfast, the two of them left the hotel and set off up Flagville's main street in search of a lawyer. By ten that matter had been attended to. They had found a capable man willing to assume King's defense at the boy's preliminary hearing, that afternoon. They left the lawyer's chambers and returned to the street.

And there Nancy said, "You've got dozens of things that you probably want to attend to by yourself. So I'll excuse you now till the hearing, shall I?"

Jim took the hint. Gathering that she had personal matters of her own to attend to, or that she wished simply to be alone with her thoughts for a while, he bid her good-by. He stood there, watched her until she disappeared into the doorway of South Brothers' Hardware Store, a half-block down the street. And then he set out alone and like a lost soul to kill the rest of the morning. He never remembered having passed a longer one.

But the morning finally ended; the afternoon came, and with it came Jim's opportunity to escort Nancy to the pink granite court-house, the scene of King Claiborne's preliminary hearing. The boy had been booked the night before, but not indicted. Now a judge was to hear a summary of the State's case, and decide whether the evidence was sufficient to warrant holding the prisoner for trial.

It was a procedure which commenced with a formal motion by the lawyer whom Jim had retained to defend King, asking that the charges against his client be dismissed. The man harped, as Jim had instructed him to harp, upon the unnaturalness of the crime, its utter lack of rhyme, reason, logic or explanation. Then the judge turned to the district attorney, and asked the district attorney to outline the State's case. Jim and Nancy settled back to hear a rehash of the same questions, the same arguments which had marked the scene of the night before, up in the Claiborne room.

Only, the State didn't end its case with the presentation of the circumstantial evidence. The district attorney, when he had finished with the aspects of the case which were by now, to Jim and the girl, an old story, took a long deep breath, and commenced:

"And now the defense raises the question of a motive. Your honor, this is a matter which might perhaps be reserved for the trial. But we have no objections whatever to revealing at the present time what our contentions in that regard will be. I'll ask Ace Hadley to take the stand and tell the court what, a half-hour ago, he told me."

There was a moment's hush. Jim, with the same feeling of unpleasant shock which Ace Hadley had inspired in him upon each previous meeting, came to rigid attention. He saw Hadley, with a self-assured smile, rise from his seat among the witnesses, make his way to the stand and sit down. And then, when the hush had become breathless, he heard Hadley commence speaking.

"Why, the matter's jest this, Your

Honor," Hadley addressed the court. "I had the occasion, last night before supper, to drop into the Claiborne room for a brief parley with Bill. I hold, you see, a fifty-thousand-dollar note signed by Stan Paige of Surpise Valley who committed suicide about two weeks ago, and—"

Jim felt his tension increase. Then Stan Paige's disappearance did, somehow, somewhere, dovetail into this Claiborne case? He stole a glance at Nancy, saw her strain forward in attention also.

"And," continued Hadley, "that note's due in three weeks. I went to Bill, as president of the Surprise Valley National Bank, and asked him whether he knew if Miss Paige could meet it or not. He said he knew darned well she couldn't, and I then remarked that instead of givin' it to the bank for collection, I reckoned I'd have to give it to the sheriff."

Again Jim stole a glance at the girl, and again he saw how tense she was.

"Well," Hadley resumed, "that precipitated a family row between the Claibornes. First King asked me if I couldn't extend the note for another six months. I said I couldn't; that I'd gladly have extended it for Stan, but that I didn't see any point in extendin' it for his daughter. The father, a rancher, might have been able to pay it off with six months' leeway. The girl, of course, ain't a rancher, ain't a business woman, and at the end of six months it'd jest be the same story—no money.

"Well, King, after workin' himself up into a spasm against me, turned to his dad, and he asked his dad to pay the girl's note off. Bill said he couldn't; that he didn't have that much cash. The boy then suggested Bill's mortgagin' his own ranch to raise the money, and the old man said that wasn't good business. They had a row. Young King's pretty hot-tempered, anyway, on occasion, an' there in my presence, he called his dad a skinflint, and said that if he had any property of his own, he'd damned well borrow on it."

Jim stole a third glance at Nancy; the girl had taken to knotting and twisting a handkerchief. Then, as Ace Hadley's voice died away, the district attorney rose again. "That'll be all," he said to Hadley. He faced the judge. "In the light of Mr. Hadley's testimony," he said, "the State intends to contend this: King Claiborne shot and killed his father in order to inherit his father's ranch, because once the ranch had passed from his father's hands to his, he could have borrowed the money on it with which to aid Miss Paige."

The next was a mêlée. A little cry escaped Nancy's lips. Jim whirled to her. Simultaneously, across the room, Jim saw King Claiborne battle aside two deputy sheriffs and rise struggling to his feet. "That's a lie," the boy shouted. "It's a damn, deliberate lie!" In the same second the lawyer whom Jim had engaged for King was upon his feet also. "Your Honor," the man shouted, "may I put my client on the stand?"

Things lost their furious tempo. Nancy opened her eyes again. Jim had her there in his arms, rubbing her two cold little hands. King had been moved to the witness stand. And the lawyer was demanding, "You deny, then, do you, that there was any scene, any quarrel between you and your father before dinner last night?"

The boy seemed to have lost some of his fire and spunk. "Why, I—" His glance darted uneasily to Ace Hadley. "I do an' I don't," he said. He stammered, "I mean—Dad and I did have words, and I reckon I did call him a skinflint. But Ace has only told part of the truth without tellin' all of it."

The boy's manner was less jerky, more assured now. "Dad calmed me down. He pointed out how hard a mortgage was, sometimes, to repay. He said even if Nancy lost her share in the *Hacienda de Rosas*, she could always come to our ranch. And—and

then he reminded me that if I married her—" the boy's eyes darted briefly to Nancy's, "—that she wouldn't have much use for her father's ranch any longer, anyway. Dad and I made up before we come down to supper."

The boy broke off; he stood up abruptly, pointed a finger at Ace Hadley, and shouted, "And if Ace says anythin' different, if he tries to make out there was any real, serious difference between Dad an' me, he's tellin' a downright malicious lie. Jim Vesper killed my dad. Jim and Ace are in cahoots on somethin'! Don't ask me what it is, because I don't know. But I do know—"

He got no further. Two court attendants had pounced upon him, and were dragging him back to the prisoner's dock.

The judge was rapping for order. The man waited until the courtroom became completely silent, and then he said gravely, "Motion for the defense denied. I recommend that the prisoner be held without bail for trial."

The judge rose. The court criers went through their set phrases. The two deputies in charge of King Claiborne exited with their prisoner through a side door. And Jim turned uncertainly to Nancy Paige.

"You—*you* don't believe I'm in cahoots in anythin' with Ace Hadley, do you?" he demanded.

Her head came up; she laughed ever so softly. "Do I act as if I thought that? Have I hinted even from the beginning that I thought King's innocence depended on your guilt?" She shook her head. "No, Jim Vesper, put that idea out of your head, here and now. King still accuses you because—well, he's still thinking back to last night. He knows he didn't commit the murder; you were the only other person on the scene, and in spite of all evidence to the contrary, he can't get it out of his head that you're guilty. But I know you're not, and I never thought you were."

She had commenced leading the way up the crowded aisle toward the end of the room as she spoke. They followed the others out into the corridor, and then to the street. Jim fell in step beside her. Neither mentioned any destination, but they started, as if by common impulse, back to the hotel. Nancy added soberly as they walked along, "But if I'm discounting part of what King said, I'm not discounting all of it. Are you?"

Jim looked at her. She went on, "If I'm going to believe in King's innocence—and I still do believe in it—I've got to believe that everything he told there on the stand today was either the truth or the truth as he understood it. I've got to believe, for instance, that he and his father had patched up their quarrel."

Jim caught his breath. "And by implication, then, that Ace Hadley was deliberately lyin' when he tried to make out that the quarrel hadn't been patched up?"

She nodded.

And Jim said soberly, "The emphasis, of course, bein' on the 'deliberately.'" His head buzzed for a second. He looked at her sharply. "There was bad blood, was there, between Ace Hadley and Bill Claiborne? There was some reason why—"

She shook her head. "I only wish there was, Jim. It'd be so simple if there had been. But then, as far as that goes, there wasn't any bad blood between Ace Hadley and Dad, either. Dad and Ace were friends; Ace and Bill were friends. It's—"

They had reached the hotel and entered the lobby. She broke off in a sigh. "I don't know really what I'm trying to say. Because if I'm trying to say that Ace killed Bill Claiborne and is trying to throw the suspicion on King, it doesn't make any sense. Ace and Bill weren't enemies, and Ace's motive couldn't have been revenge. And profit is just as far out of the picture. You heard them say there in court, today, that King was the sole

heir under his father's will. So I reckon I'm all mixed up with one of our hunches again. And I reckon I'd better stop looking at hunches, and consider facts. But it does make me wonder. If King and his father had made up before they went to supper, why does Ace say they didn't?"

She added, "And what are we going to do now? They—they hold their murder trials so terribly fast, here in Flagville, Jim. A man's indicted one week, convicted the next, and—"

She broke off, but Jim caught the unspoken rest "—and hanged the next." He winced. "We'll do somethin'," he promised. "There now, Nancy—Miss Nancy—we'll think of somethin'."

She didn't seem to notice either that he had called her by her first name, or that he had corrected himself and added "Miss" to it. All of a sudden, the animation which had characterized her conversation on their way home seemed to flow out of her. She said miserably, "I thought of something, sort of an ace in the hole for him, in case he didn't get off, this afternoon. But—but I don't know now whether I thought of the wisest thing. I swear I don't."

Jim looked at her for further explanation, but the explanation wasn't forthcoming. She said simply, "I'll just have to pray, I reckon." Then with a sudden smile, she moved away from him. "And now I'll go upstairs and rest."

He stood there, watching her move across the lobby and ascend the steps. He smiled. Well—she hadn't said good-by to him, this time. She hadn't told him she had no further need of him. And she'd permitted him to speak of their plans in the plural, "We'll do this."

HE waited until she had disappeared. Then he walked back out onto Main Street. It was dusk, about the same hour that he'd hit town, last night. The orchestras had commenced to tune up again. The bar doors up and down the street were opening and closing with increasing frequency. The plank sidewalks were crowded; the hitching-rails were full. Life, here, went on. His walk took him as far as the court-house corner. Its upper floors were dark, now. Lights glowed only in the cellar jail.

Jim lounged against a lamp post. Well, he thought, if everything else failed, you could always save a man's life by— He left the thought suspended in mid-air. Jim Vesper found himself abruptly crossing the street to the tiny green surrounding the court-house, his blood tingling. They tried them and they convicted them and hanged them so quickly here, she'd said. Swift Frontier justice!

He reached the lighted cellar portal marked, "Sheriff's Office." He swung open the door and stepped inside. The sheriff, whom he'd seen briefly last night, whom he'd seen again briefly this afternoon, sat back in a swivel chair, his feet on the top of a flat-top desk. His holster and a ring of keys hung at his side. Behind him, ajar, was the portal leading to the cell block in the rear.

Knowing quite fully that he was suddenly mad, Jim came to a halt there. It would be so simple. He poised himself. His hand tensed, ready for a swift cross draw. And then—

In the precise second in which he had intended to draw on the sheriff, there was a sudden crash as if of a tray and dishes in the rear cell block. The sheriff, before Jim could act, was upon his feet, rushing by the grilled door which stood ajar.

The next Jim beheld as if in a dream. He had come here with the wild thought of assisting King Claiborne to escape from jail, of fleeing with the youth to—well, back to the boy's haunts in Surprise Valley, perhaps. But up the long aisle, toward the sheriff, a gun in his hand, came the boy now! Jim froze! The sheriff's right hand dropped for his gun. The gun

blasted. But the boy's rush had carried his body past the barrel. King had leaped at the officer much as Jim, last night, had leaped at King. He butted the sheriff over with his head. The sheriff struck the stone floor—lay there limp. And King's charge brought him into the room with Jim.

Jim had come to assist the boy. But the instant the boy's glance lit upon him, Jim realized that the youth was in no mood to take assistance from him, of all people. King Claiborne's hand came up; fired the gun which he could have used but hadn't used on the sheriff. And Jim lit behind the sheriff's desk but a split second before a bullet had cleaved the air where he'd been.

What might have been the eventual outcome of the fray, Jim never knew. For the boy, his first bullet missing, fired a second shot into the desk, and then started round the corner of it. For an instant Jim was faced with the grim choice between letting the boy kill him, or wounding the boy to disarm him, and thus making his jailbreak impossible.

But the situation, in a split second, shifted. The front door through which Jim had entered the sheriff's office opened, and Ace Hadley leaped over the threshold with the shout. "Did I hear sh—" The word, "shooting," died! The boy had whirled, and, beholding Ace, shifted his gun. The trigger clicked; the gun must have jammed, for there was no report. Reversing the weapon in his hands, King made a leap. He brought the butt end of the gun down over Ace's head, before the man could dodge out of the way. Then as Ace fell, he leaped over the man's body and out the door.

Ace was upon his feet in a second. He flung himself to the door, Jim at his heels. And a strange thing happened. As the boy rushed for the sidewalk and the hitching-rail, Ace might easily have drawn his own gun, fired and shot the boy in the back. Or he might have made the attempt, and Jim might have been compelled to leap upon him to prevent it. But Hadley made no move for his gun. He simply stood there shouting at the throngs on the sidewalk: "After him, folks! And a thousand dollars to the man that brings him back alive, savvy? *Alive!*"

Jim simply blinked. "Alive?"

The power of locomotion left Jim a second time. He stood there dazedly rooted to the spot, and beheld Ace Hadley rush to the hitching-rail from which King Claiborne had appropriated a pony. The hoofbeats of the boy's horse had started up. He was off and away and not a shot had been fired yet. Jim heard Hadley's shouts again, "Damn it, didn't you hear me, folks? That there's an escapin' prisoner! King Claiborne. After him, and a thousand dollars to the hombre that brings him in alive!"

There was a feverish and general mounting, now, at the far hitching-rail. The crowd, which hadn't heard Ace's shouts to begin with, or which, in its confusion, had allowed King to slip through its fingers, fell *en masse* upon the ponies. Men leaped into saddles and were off. The hoofbeats grew fainter and fainter.

Jim, emerging at last from his daze of bewilderment at Ace Hadley's incomprehensible conduct, turned on his heel and pushed his way back into the sheriff's office. The sheriff, dazed and groggy, had gotten to his feet by now. From the cell block to the rear of the office had appeared the equally dazed and groggy turnkey whom King must have knocked down, there in his cell, before coming into Jim's line of vision. Each man was battered, but neither was seriously injured. Jim left them to their own resources, and departed.

Twenty minutes later, Jim sat beside Nancy Paige upon one of the red plush divans back in the lobby of the Golden Palace Hotel. The girl's face was radiant, "And so he really made it," she cried, "without shooting anyone and without being shot! Oh, Jim, I'm so happy. Aren't you? We've got the

time, now, really to go into this. We—"

She broke off abruptly, looked up. Jim looked up, too. Standing in front of them was the battered and battle-scarred sheriff whom he had left back at the jail, daubing his bruises with arnica. Jim rose, but the man paid him no attention. The officer of the law looked down at Nancy Paige.

"Miss Paige," said the sheriff acidly, "shortly before noon, this mornin', you paid young King Claiborne a visit in his cell, didn't you?"

Jim felt himself tremble, and he had a premonition. He saw Nancy's tawny head come up in challenge. "And if I did?" she demanded. "You, yourself, said it was all right, didn't you?"

A snort escaped the sheriff's lips. "And who wouldn't have said it was all right? The way you talked to me, the tears in them pretty blue eyes of yours and everythin'! Yep, I gave you the permission, all right."

The man's voice mounted, "But I didn't give you the permission to smuggle young King a revolver under your coat. And that's what you did, ain't it? Clerk from South Brothers' Hardware Store jest busted into my office two minutes ago. Told me that early this mornin' he'd sold you a brand-new Colt forty-four and two boxes of ammunition. You took the gun and the shells to King, there in his cell, an hour later. King hid 'em till he seen what was goin' to happen to him at the hearin'. Then when the judge held him for trial, he—"

The man's voice went on. But Jim Vesper, for the moment, had ceased listening. She'd done this? This was what she'd referred to so cryptically when she'd told him, "I thought of something for King to do in case he didn't get off this afternoon. But I don't know whether I thought of the wisest thing. I swear I don't." But she had done it, he knew, for it all clicked. He'd seen her, this morning, enter South Brothers.

Cold perspiration leaped out upon Jim's forehead. A few moments ago he had gone to the jail with the wild idea of rescuing King Claiborne. And by a whim, a caprice of Fate, it hadn't been necessary for him to take a hand. He had been spared, he had seen the penalties, the dangers of making himself an accessory after the fact.

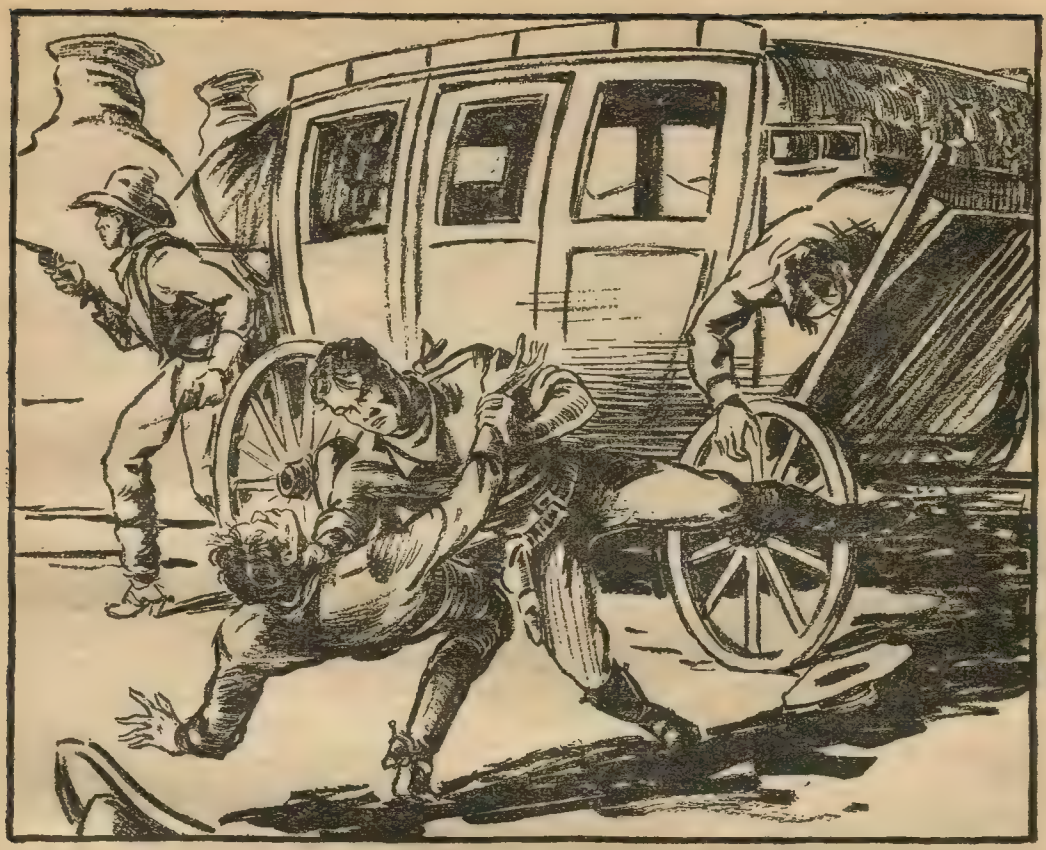
But it dawned upon him now, with an eerie little feeling, that he'd been spared those penalties and dangers only because the girl had assumed them upon her own slight shoulders. He'd won his reprieve through her, not through blind destiny.

There was a second of hush while Jim trembled and the girl was silent. Then the hush ended. Nancy opened her mouth as if to answer the sheriff. But Jim acted before she could utter a word. She was in this up to her neck, was she? Then so was he!

Jim whirled, seized the officer of the law by his coat collar, spun the man round. He lifted a blow from the floor, smashed it into the man's face. Then as the sheriff reeled back, Jim's right hand performed the lightning task of a blurred cross draw. His gun came up, cleared its tallowed holster, poised itself horizontally. And Jim cried, "Reach, hombre! Because if you think you're arrestin' her, you ain't!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

In the next issue
Stories by FRANK C. ROBERTSON, STEPHEN PAYNE, WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH, MARIE DE NERVAUD, and others



Double Frame-Up

By Eric Howard

A ruthless man was the rancher, Gunnard, sweeping aside whoever got in his way. But with eyes sharpened by the whetstone of love, Jim Valliant saw through the man's treachery.

THE tall, lean, bronzed cowpuncher, with a deputy sheriff's badge pinned to his plaid shirt, was dozing in the sheriff's chair. His booted heels rested on the sheriff's desk, and his sombrero was tilted down over his eyes. There was a slight, quizzical smile on his lips as he breathed deeply and easily.

Sheriff Grant, entering his office excitedly, changed all that. The sheriff was a short, heavily built, deep-chested man, with a powerful voice. He walked swiftly and energetically, rolling a little from one bowed leg to the other, his heavy shoulders thrust forward belligerently.

"Hey!" he bellowed. And as he spoke, he knocked his deputy's heels from the scarred desk.

The deputy's feet hit the floor, his hat bounced an inch, and the smile left his lips. Automatically, his hand shot to his gun. Then, seeing the sheriff, he grinned sheepishly and sat up.

"Yuh want to look out, Joe," he drawled. "Some day yuh'll wake me up when I ain't dreamin' sweet dreams, an' I'll start shootin'."

"Fork yore bronc an' ride, Jim!" said

the sheriff. "Here's yore chance to prove to the tax-payers of Puerco County an' to me that yuh earn yore money. Big Bill Gunnard was shot an' robbed last night. I want yuh to go out there, hell-bent, an' try to catch the feller that potted him. Drygulched him two miles from the Circle V ranch house, late last night, an' took two thousand dollars off him. Bill had collected that cash over to Fargo on a loan that's due. A Circle V rider jest come in to report it. As yuh know, Big Bill has a lot o' influence an' plenty o' votes. I won't get reelected if he ain't with me, an' if I don't get in again, yuh'll be out. So do yore darndest.

"I'd go myself, only I got to take that killer to the pen. Seein' he promised to get away from me, I'm takin' him myself. If he does get away, I'll be responsible, nobody else. So it's up to you, boy. See if yuh can keep awake long enough to trail the feller that shot an' robbed Big Bill."

"Didn't kill him?" inquired the deputy sheriff.

"No." Joe Grant shook his grizzled head. "Jest creased him, an' he was out for a while. When he come to his money was gone. He found his horse an' rode home."

"That's the second time he's been robbed in a year."

"Yeah. But we got the other feller—that was before I took you on. Found the money in his shack. He was a nester up there in the end o' Pine Valley. He put up a yarn about the money bein' planted there an' claimed he was framed. But he had no alibi an' he got two years. He's in the pen now. I may see him when I'm down there. Well, get goin', Jim. Big Bill craves action, an' likewise results."

Jim Valliant stood up to his full height of six feet two. He grinned as he rubbed the badge on his shirt. He saluted Joe Grant and said: "Don't worry, Boss. The old range detective is now on the job. Where in heck is my magnifyin' glass?"

"Jim, one thing I want to tell yuh—jest don't act funny with Big Bill. He's easy riled, an' we want him with us. Savvy? An' another thing—I'm sendin' yuh out there to trail this drygulcher an' bandit, not to go callin' on any young ladies."

The sheriff bit off the end of a thick cigar and lighted it. Over the match flame his keen gray eyes looked into Jim's.

"But if it should happen, Boss," said Jim easily, "that the trail leads around to John Blaine's *rancho*—"

"In that case, I reckon yuh'll call on Miss Jo Ann an' nothin' will stop yuh. Only be sure yuh follow the trail."

Jim saluted again and left the sheriff's office, going around to the stable at the rear. There he saddled and bridled his bay gelding, placed his rifle in a saddle scabbard, saw that he had plenty of ammunition, and rode out. He was thinking a good deal more about the prospect of seeing Jo Ann Blaine than of the situation that summoned him to the Circle V. He hadn't seen Jo Ann in a month, and that was a long time. The sheriff's office had been pretty busy lately, and he hadn't been able to get away. Jo Ann's mother had been sick, and she hadn't come to town with her father on his last trip.

As he left town, Jim was overtaken by a Circle V rider. This was the man who had reported the assault and robbery to the sheriff.

"Howdy, Slim. Ridin' home?"

"Yeah. Jest come in to tell the sheriff about Big Bill. He's sendin' you out? The boss wanted him to come himself."

"Too bad, Slim. He'll have to put up with me. The sheriff is takin' a convicted murderer to the pen, an' I'm on the robb'ry detail."

"Yuh mean Killer Carnes?"

"That's what they call him."

"I thought he was already in the pen. That feller'll try to get away from Joe Grant. An' mebbe he'll make it."

Jim Valliant looked at Slim Waden

out of sleepy eyes. The man's thin, twisted face bore an unpleasant expression, and his eyes shifted. Jim said nothing. He was thinking of something the murderer had said. "I've got friends from here to the Border," he had boasted. "Plenty of 'em. Yuh'll find that out, all right."

It occurred to Jim that this Circle V puncher might be one of them. But this was no time to look into that; Carnes would be handcuffed to the sheriff, all the way, and if he made a move to get away, Joe Grant was not the man to hold his fire.

"What about this robb'ry?" Jim asked.

"When we get there, I'll show yuh where it happened. Must 'a' been about midnight last night. The boss was ridin' home from Fargo, alone. Somebody must 'a' known he went there to collect, an' trailed him back or else waited for him. Anyhow, he shot from behind an' he didn't care whether he killed Big Bill or not. It was jest luck Bill was only creased. Got a bad scalp wound an' his head aches all the time. Well, yuh won't have any more trouble catchin' the thief than yuh did the last one. That is, the sheriff wouldn't."

Jim grinned. "But yuh don't know about me. Is that it?"

"Yo're a green deputy, ain't yuh? No, I don't know about you."

"Has Big Bill got any idea who might have shot him?"

"Sure he has. Plenty. He'll tell yuh. An' when we get there, I'll show yuh a trail as plain as daylight."

"If it's that plain, I'll try to follow it," Jim promised.

"I wonder."

They rode on in silence, Jim reflecting over the Circle V rider's words and manner of speech.

AN hour later they reached the place where the robbery had taken place. At Slim Waden's suggestion, Jim dismounted and followed the Circle V puncher to the square of bare gravel where Big Bill Gunnard had fallen from his horse after being shot. There was a small circle of dark earth, colored by Big Bill's blood, that Slim carefully pointed out.

"An' there's where he laid when he fell off," said Slim. "Yuh can see the outline o' his body. Bill's the biggest man around, I reckon. Now looka-here!"

He carefully walked around the square of gravel to a thicket of mesquite, and just as carefully pointed out where Big Bill's assailant had stood.

"Yuh can see his heel marks, plain as day," he explained, "an' here's he hoofprints o' his hoss. See? He took off thataway after shootin' an' robbin' Big Bill. See anythin' peculiar 'bout them hoofprints?"

"Why, yes," said Jim Valliant slowly. "The hoss had lost his left hind shoe."

"Uh-huh!" nodded Slim. "Better measure them footprints, hadn't yuh?"

"Might as well," said Jim, frowning.

He knelt down, using a piece of string for the measurements, knotting it to mark the length of the bandit's boot.

"Oughta have my magnifyin' glass with me," he grinned.

"What for?"

"All good detectives carry 'em."

Slim Waden scowled at this pleasantry. "Yuh got enough to go on, if yuh know yore bus'ness. The trail's plain enough—a hoss with one shoe missin', the way the feller took off, an' the size an' shape o' his boots. Trail him an' find the money he took off Bill. That'll be evidence enough an' plenty."

"That's as much as they had on that nester that got sent up for robbin' Big Bill, ain't it?"

"Yeah. This is prob'ly one o' his friends."

As they walked back to their horses, Jim said: "I'll take the trail right now. No use me goin' on to the Circle V to talk to Big Bill. From what

yuh've showed me, I can see what happened."

"Better come along, first. Bill can tell yuh who he suspects."

"Who?" demanded Jim, knowing what answer to expect.

Slim scratched his chin, and his eyes shifted. "Better let Bill tell yuh."

"No, I'm followin' the trail o' the missin' horseshoe," said Jim. "Tell me yoreself. If I don't get anywhere, I'll drop around an' talk to Bill."

"John Blaine—or somebody from his outfit."

Jim Valliant pretended to be surprised. "Blaine?" he laughed. "Why in heck should Blaine, the owner of a big spread, go in for robb'ry? An' why should he hold up one of his neighbors?"

"He needs money, bad. Tried to borrow from Big Bill. His wife's sick an' he's got to take her away to a hospital. He's got beef, o' course, but he can't borrow on it, the way prices are. When Big Bill turned him down, Blaine threatened him."

"Yeah?"

"An' I happen to know that he's got a hoss like that. Saw it yesterday in his corral."

"H'mn! Funny he'd ride that one, supposin' he set out to hold up Big Bill."

"Men do funny things when they get mad an' turn crooked," observed Slim. "Yuh goin' over to Blaine's?"

Jim Valliant nodded. "Yeah, I'll go over an' look around for Big Bill's money. If it's there, it'll look like Blaine robbed him, huh?"

"Look like it!" exploded Slim. "It'll prove it. I sure wish the sheriff had come out, like Bill wanted. Yuh've been kinda goin' with Blaine's gal, ain't yuh?"

"Kinda," admitted Jim. "*Adios*, Slim. Tell Big Bill I'm on the job an' I always get my man."

Thin lips twisted into an unpleasant smile, Slim Waden watched the deputy sheriff ride away. At last he turned and rode toward the Circle V.

"OH, I'm glad to see you, Jim!" said Jo Ann Blaine as she greeted the deputy sheriff when he dismounted before the ranch house.

For a moment Jim stood before her, looking up at her, feasting his eyes on the girl who was the queen of the rangeland and the queen of his heart.

"Yuh look like the picture on that new saddle company calendar," he said. "Only more so."

"I do not," she laughed. "That girl's a beauty. I've got freckles and my nose turns up, and look at my hands! I was helping Dad and got them all scratched up."

Jim caught them and held them, inspecting them gravely.

"I must be sorta blind, mebbe. They look jest right to me."

She led him into the house, explaining that dinner would be ready soon. He inquired about her mother, and Jo Ann said that they were taking her to the hospital in Cedar City.

"I'm going with her, of course," she said. "And the doctor promises she'll be perfectly well after the operation. It isn't awfully serious, he says. Dad's taking us in tomorrow. He'll stay a few days and then come back. We'll be there about a month or six weeks."

"I'm glad she's goin' to be all right," said Jim. "I wonder if I could mebbe get sent to Cedar City while yo're there!"

"Why haven't you been out before this?"

"Well, this sheriffin' business is worse than punchin' cows. I took it up 'cause I thought it was an easy life, an' Joe Grant's been workin' me hard. Why, right now, I'm out on a job. Big Bill Gunnard was shot an' robbed last night."

"He was? Why—" She gasped, and there was a deeper color in her cheeks. "Why," she continued, "it was less than a year ago that he was held up and robbed! You remember? No, you weren't here then. They accused Stan Preston and convicted him. Dad never

believed he was guilty. I didn't, either."

"That was the nester up in Pine Valley?"

"Yes. He lived up there all alone, and he had had some trouble with Gunnard. We liked him, and we didn't think he'd hold up or rob anyone. The funny thing was, he had plenty of money for his needs. His people in the East sent him money regularly. He came here for his health and didn't pretend to be a rancher. He just had a few horses. We couldn't understand why he should commit robbery when he had all he needed and was happy, living there. Dad wanted him to have his people send out a good lawyer and fight the case hard. But he didn't want them to know he was in trouble. He claimed it was all a frame-up and when they convicted him, he gave up and went to jail. He said the disgrace would hurt his family worse than the jail would hurt him."

"Seems like Gunnard is bandits' meat, for some reason."

"Plenty of reason!" said Jo Ann firmly. "He antagonizes everyone in the country, rides rough-shod over them, cheats them and tricks them at every chance. It's a wonder he hasn't been killed before this!"

"I reckon yuh don't like Big Bill," said Jim mildly.

Jo Ann laughed at her own anger, and then said: "No, I don't like him. I don't trust him. Dad had to borrow money to take Mother to the hospital. He was short of ready cash. So was nearly everyone else. When Gunnard first came to the Circle V, Dad did him many favors. Knowing he had money, Dad thought he might borrow from him. I didn't want him to ask, even, but he did. And Gunnard turned him down as if his credit and his word weren't any good! He was ugly about it. Dad could have horse-whipped him! Fortunately, Dad was able to borrow from an old friend, but it took longer to reach him."

Jo Ann didn't say who her father's old friend was, and Jim didn't ask. He was not here to look for evidence, in spite of the fact that the trail of the lost horseshoe had led him unmistakably to John Blaine's ranch. Or, if he looked for evidence, it would not be evidence against John Blaine.

The rancher came into the house presently, and greeted Jim warmly. Jo Ann got up to go into the kitchen.

"Ain't seen yuh in a coon's age," drawled John Blaine, lighting his pipe. "Jo Ann's sort o' missed yuh, seems like."

"Been busy," said Jim. He lowered his voice and leaned toward the older man, talking swiftly, his eyes reading Blaine's face.

John Blaine held his pipe in his hand, staring at the deputy sheriff. When Jim had finished what he had to say, Blaine leaned back in his chair and gazed thoughtfully across the room. At last he spoke.

"Lucky for me it's you an' not Joe Grant that's here," he said. "Grant would jump at the fixed-up evidence, 'specially since he wants Gunnard's support for reelection. An' I'd have a hard time provin' my innocence, boy. They timed it pretty neat. I did ask Gunnard to lend me a thousand dollars. I needed it quick, an' he's the only one around here with cash. I helped him out a time or two. As Jo Ann said, he turned me down an' I didn't like the way he did it. I cussed him out plenty. Yeah, yuh could say I threatened him. Knowin' he had loans out over at Fargo, I might 'a' knowed when he went there he'd come back with money. I might 'a' laid for him, shot him an' robbed him. See it all? I need cash, he has it, he won't lend it, I threaten him, I rob him. One, two, three!

"Back that up with the fact that the robber was mounted on a hoss o' mine —yeah, my favorite pony threw a shoe the other day an' I haven't had time to fix it—an' that the trail leads right back here, an' yuh've got a case, Jim. Now I wonder if Gunnard knew I'd

borrowed the money—an' who from. An' jest how could he have found that out? If yuh should search this house, yuh'd find it, Jim—a thousand dollars. An' Gunnard could swear till he's blue in the face it's his money. Neat, huh? Jest as neat as the way they fixed Stan Preston."

"Who did yuh borrow it from?" asked Jim. "If it's any o' my bus'ness."

"From Stan Preston," said John Blaine.

Jim Valliant stared at him, amazed. "From the nester that's in the pen for robbin' Big Bill before?"

"Yeah. Stan ain't a nester, first off. He homesteaded a section up there 'cause he liked the country. Got into a ruckus or two with Gunnard, right off, over springs on his land. Stan's people are big folks, back East—in Washington, in fact. They sent him out here for his health an' also 'cause he'd been in a scrape or two back there. He told me all about it, straight, an' I believe him. He has plenty money of his own, an' his folks have more.

"When Gunnard framed him—I'm the only one around that knows who Stan is—he wouldn't let me call on his people. Went to jail, instead. I get all his mail an' relay it to him; he sends his letters to me an' I mail 'em. His folks think he's here, livin' quiet an' healthy on his *rancho.* Jest as well, mebbe. He'll be out in a few months. When they sentenced him, he turned over his bank account to me. Gave me his power of attorney, an' I deposit the checks that come from his lawyer, every month.

"When I was up against it for cash, I wrote him, and he answered for me to borrow what I needed. But yuh see, he's a criminal—a prisoner—an' his word wouldn't be taken. The bank would know I drew out this money, but Gunnard could still claim that's jest an alibi an' what I've got is his."

The ringing triangle interrupted them, and Jo Ann, radiant from the heat of the kitchen and the joy in her heart, came running in and slipped one hand into her father's, one into Jim's.

"Dad, I don't want you to talk politics or business or anything else with Jim. It's been a whole month since I've seen him, and—"

"—and it seems like a year!" said Jim.

They talked and laughed during the meal, but John Blaine betrayed his worry by thoughtful silences and by tapping the table with his fingers.

"This ain't politics, Jo Ann," he apologized, "but I thought o' somethin' I want to ask Jim. Has Killer Carnes been sent to the pen yet?"

"Sheriff's takin' him himself—today," said Jim. "That's why he sent me out to see about Gunnard."

"Today?" exclaimed John Blaine. "By stage to Cedar City, then by train?"

"Yes, sir," Jim nodded. "Carnes has promised to get away from him, but Sheriff Grant will have him handcuffed to him all the way an'—"

"Jim, finish eatin'! We're ridin'!"

"Where?"

"There'll be an attempt made to take Carnes from Grant as the stage goes through Diablo Canyon. This is more than a hunch, boy; it's certain. They'll kill Grant to get Carnes, if they have to. Come on!"

Jim Valliant gulped the remainder of his coffee.

"Sure I'll ride. But—"

"It's like this, Jim," said the rancher. "Carnes is a friend o' Gunnard's. I've seen 'em together, heard 'em talkin', when they didn't know I was around. Carnes does Gunnard's dirty work. This killin' he's sentenced for—that was Gunnard's job, too, I reckon. Gunnard promised they'd never take Carnes to the pen. This supposed robb'ry, last night, serves two purposes. Gunnard hoped to get the sheriff out here, in which case you'd be takin' Carnes; an' he also figgered to get the goods on me. I reckon he thought the evidence would sound good to Joe Grant, same as it did when he framed Stan. An' no doubt he planned to finish you

in order to free Carnes. Let's ride!"

"But Dad, you can't go!" said Jo Ann. "You've got to take Mother to Cedar City. What's this about you and the robbery?"

John Blaine sank back in his chair. "That's right," he said. "I can't chance it, Jim. Got to get Mother to town. Better go today, instead of tomorrow, as we planned. Get her safe away, before Gunnard— Why, seems like Gunnard aims to accuse me o' robbin' him, honey."

"Why, the lying, crooked—" the girl began.

"Sh! Don't cuss, baby. Jim saw through it right off. Jim, take two, three o' the boys an' beat the stage to Diablo Canyon. Mebbe yuh can stop 'em from killin' Joe Grant—a good sheriff, but dumb—an' keep 'em from freein' Carnes."

Jim Valliant was on his feet, ready to go. But he shook his head.

"I'm the deputy sheriff. It's my job. I'll go alone. If Gunnard is there, he'll have men with him. I might be better off alone than with two or three. Besides, the boys had better be here, in case Gunnard comes this way. You take Mother Blaine to Cedar City. I'll be seein' yuh there."

He was reaching for his hat when Jo Ann caught his arm.

"Jim!" she whispered, looking into his eyes. "Jim, darling!"

His arms closed around her and he saw in her eyes what he had never seen before, what he had always hoped to see.

"Honey, I'll be in Cedar City soon if I have to resign! They tell me there's a parson there that gets plumb eloquent marryin' folks."

"I'll be waiting for you, Jim. Be careful!"

She held him for a long moment, as though she could not bear to let him go. But she realized that she could not keep him, and she had no desire to hold him from his duty.

He kissed her, and then he was gone.

DIABLO CANYON winds tortuously between high red sandstone cliffs. The road is rough and rutty, often washed out in the rainy season; yet it is the main road connecting Puerco County with the railroad at Cedar City.

On a ledge of red rock above the road, at a point where a trail from the north cuts in, Jim Valliant waited. Gunnard and four Circle V men he had seen on a rise, a mile away. They were approaching the road by means of the trail. At this point, where many robberies had occurred in the past when shipments from the now closed mines had come this way, they would stop the stage. They would take Killer Carnes away from the sheriff, even if they had to kill Joe Grant to do it, John Blaine had said. Gunnard evidently needed Carnes.

Jim's lithe body tensed. The five men from the Circle V were riding down the trail now. Suddenly they stopped, hailed by another man. Jim leaned forward and peered around the corner of projecting rock. The man who joined Gunnard and his followers was Spike Doolin, one of John Blaine's riders. He rode beside Gunnard and all six now advanced to the road.

They dismounted there to await the stage, and their voices floated up to Jim.

"Yuh should have fixed it with the sheriff to come out here hisself," said Spike Doolin. "That damn deputy is crazy about Blaine's gal. He wouldn't arrest the old man for anythin'. He talked to 'em over there an' ate dinner, then he high-tailed it."

"Where'd he go?" demanded Gunnard. "Didn't he look for the stolen money?"

Doolin shrugged. "I dunno where he went. I aimed to foller him, but the boss called me to hitch up a team to the spring wagon. I couldn't get away. He's takin' the ol' lady to Cedar City today, an'—"

Gunnard cut him short with a string

of violent oaths, then called Slim Waden and rebuked him for not having made sure that Sheriff Joe Grant would come out personally to investigate the robbery.

"Hell, I didn't know he wasn't comin'," Slim said plaintively. "It was news to me when I met up with this deputy."

"Shut up!" snapped Gunnard. "Lemme think."

Jim grinned as he looked down upon them. Far down the road he saw a cloud of dust. The stage was approaching. His fingers caressed the barrel of his rifle. But his grin faded as he heard Gunnard's next words.

"I got it, boys!" he exclaimed. "I aimed to keep Joe Grant in as sheriff, but I can't do it. Seein' he's fool enough to take Carnes to the pen, after plenty warnin', he's through. We'll name our own sheriff. When Carnes is free of him, there'll be a job for him right now. He'll stop John Blaine when he drives through here an' Blaine'll go for his gun. Carnes'll finish him. We'll let the old woman an' the gal go on. With Blaine out of the way an' our own sheriff in, we're all to the good. An' it'll look like Carnes killed the sheriff, got away an' later killed Blaine. Carnes can't hang more'n once for murder, anyway."

"How about this deputy?"

"Him?" said Gunnard. "I figger he's either gone to meet the stage an' tell Joe he don't think Blaine robbed me, or else he's ridin' ahead o' Blaine to see the road's clear. Jest keep yore eyes peeled for him an' treat him the same as yuh would Grant. Then there's the stage driver—he's been due to retire for ten years. The time is now. An' all the blame rests on Carnes! He won't care; he's a known killer now."

Gunnard laughed, and Jim Valliant stared at him. It was incredible that a man could plan to kill three others—four, counting Jim himself—in cold blood. Yet there was no mistaking Gunnard's intention.

Slim Waden ran up a low hill and peered down the road.

"Here she comes, Bill," he said.

Gunnard got up and stationed his men, two to jump for the horses, two more to cover the stage driver from either side, himself and Slim Waden to beat the driver and Joe Grant to the draw.

The stage came on. Behind it, in the distance, there was another cloud of dust—John Blaine's spring wagon! The rancher, cutting into the road from his spread, must have seen the stage; he must have tried to overtake it, to warn the sheriff. Jo Ann was riding behind the wagon.

Jim crouched and lifted his rifle. Before the stage reached this point, he must stop Gunnard and his men. His first shot would warn the sheriff, and then—

Gunnard's sixgun was out of its holster, swinging low at his side. Slowly he raised it, ready to send a lead slug into Joe Grant's heart, as Slim Waden was prepared to kill the old stage driver.

The stage was quite close now, coming fast.

Jim Valliant fired, and Gunnard's weapon shot across the road. He clutched his wrist and yelled in pain. Jim fired again and Slim Waden's scream echoed with Gunnard's.

The stage had halted, a glance told him, and the driver had clutched his rifle, looking up the canyon.

"Hold her, Hiram!" yelled Jim. "It's a hold-up."

His words to the stage driver revealed his own position, and lead rained upon the walls of the cliff. Ducking low, Jim fired again and again. Both Gunnard and Waden, in spite of injuries, had guns in their good hands.

Two men were coming up the cliff toward Jim. Bullets from their guns sang past him, struck the rocky ledge and fell at his feet. Jim leaned over the ledge and fired upon them. One man fell, slipped back and slid down the cliff. The other fired at Jim, and

a bullet tore through the flesh of Jim's arm. It dizzied him and he slipped over the ledge, letting his rifle fall, reaching for sixguns. He saw that Gunnard and the others in the road were advancing on the stage; he saw Joe Grant get out, his big prisoner handcuffed at his side. Then he saw Killer Carnes lift his arms and bring the handcuffs down on the sheriff's head. Grant slumped beside the huge murderer and the latter bent over him, trying to seize Grant's gun in his manacled hands.

A shot recalled Jim to the man advancing upon him. He leaped down, collided with the other, sent him sprawling into the dust of the road. A bullet kept him there. Running forward, with guns blazing, he followed Gunnard and the others, calling to the stage driver to shoot them down.

But the sheriff was helpless now, knocked out by the killer's blow, and Carnes held the officer's gun awkwardly. The stage driver had rolled off his seat, wounded, and Gunnard suddenly swung around to face Jim. As the latter retreated against the wall of the canyon, he was aware of John Blaine's swift approach. Leaving the spring wagon behind, the rancher had mounted Jo Ann's saddle horse and was coming to join the fight. Jim called out a warning to him, advising him to retreat. But he galloped on.

When Gunnard turned away to shout a command to Carnes, Jim leaped from the wall and madly hurled lead. In his heart was a grim sense of failure, a deep fear. Carnes would kill the sheriff, the stage driver was already wounded, and Gunnard would finish John Blaine. Another bullet struck him, jolted him, and Jim went to his knees. A mistiness came across his eyes and he shook his head savagely. Carnes seemed to be lying across the body of the sheriff, and Gunnard's face was a huge mask of malice, grinning before him. Jim struggled up and plunged ahead, one thought in his mind —to close with Gunnard and to keep him from attacking Blaine.

He smashed into Big Bill, wondering why the other hadn't shot him, and the impact carried them both to the ground. Then Jim saw that Gunnard's arms hung at his sides, that he held no gun. He dropped his own and smashed his fist again and again into Gunnard's face. Something struck him, and he fell across Big Bill, unconscious.

He was unaware of John Blaine's calm voice. He heard nothing. He did not even feel Jo Ann's arms around him as she knelt there, after running from where she had left her mother in the spring wagon. It was a long time before Jim Valliant was aware of anything.

WHEN he awakened, he was in a white, cool room. It puzzled him. He looked around slowly, taking it in, bit by bit. He became aware of a man seated beside his bed. It was John Blaine.

Jim grinned up at the rancher, whose long, serious face was the only familiar thing in the room. He made a sound in his throat, trying to speak.

John Blaine sighed in relief, and his hand clasped Jim's.

"Yo're in the hospital at Cedar City, son," he said. "We brought yuh with us, after the fight. Mamma's here, too, an' Jo Ann'll be back soon. She's been here most of the time. Yuh been unconscious almost a week, an' yuh had us scared. But—"

Another sound issued from Jim's throat, and John Blaine interpreted it to be a question.

"Nothin' to worry about, nothin' to think about, Jim. That's all over. Yuh finished Carnes before he could kill the sheriff. Joe Grant's as well as ever. An' yuh did Gunnard up proper, hand-to-hand. They was two o' his men—an' one 'em was Spike Doolin, one of my hands—on their feet an' shootin' when I got there. The rest yuh'd done for. One of 'em slugged yuh with a

rifle barrel while yuh was tendin' to Gunnard, an' I shot him down. Doolin give in, then, an' he's told us plenty.

"It was him that rode my hoss over there when I was supposed to rob Gunnard. It was him that planted the money in Stan Preston's house. Well, Stan's gettin' a pardon; he'll be here today. Gunnard framed Stan 'cause the boy had discovered he was workin' with Carnes. An' that's why he wanted me out o' the way; he suspected I knew him an' Carnes were pardners. He aimed to get rid of anybody that knew too much an' might fight him.

"Well, that's over. Gunnard's in jail, an' if he lives after the beatin' yuh gave him, he'll go to the pen. Carnes is dead. The others don't count. Joe Grant will live to go on sheriffin' a long time."

"The stage driver?" whispered Jim. "Old Hi—"

John Blaine chuckled. "That son of a gun wasn't even wounded. Jest pertended to be. They thought he was dead an' didn't waste lead on him. He's retirin'—says his heart won't stand excitement any more. We're sure happy Stan Preston is free. Jo Ann went to meet him. But she'll be back 'fore long."

Jim Valliant closed his eyes. He felt a pain deep within him that had nothing to do with his injuries. Stan Preston—Jo Ann! He remembered the glow in the girl's eyes when she had defended Preston. He remembered how affectionately she and her father had spoken of him. He loved Jo Ann, and he supposed she knew it, although he had never put it into words. He had been sure, especially when he had left the ranch to prevent Gunnard from freeing Carnes, that she loved him. But Preston—

John Blaine tiptoed out of the room. He thought Jim was asleep. Jim lay there, eyes closed, for a long time. From all they said, Preston must be all right. If Jo Ann loved him—

The door opened and someone came in, stepping lightly. Jim looked up and saw Jo Ann. She was bending over him and she had never seemed so beautiful, so desirable. Behind her, though, stood a tall, good-looking man, dressed carelessly but expensively. Jim liked the clean contour of his jaw, the friendly quirk of his lips, the clear honesty of his blue eyes.

This was Preston.

"Jim, darling!" The girl's eyes were moist as her arms went around him and she laid her cheek against his. "Oh, Jim, you had us worried!"

A moment later, she said: "I want you to know Stan Preston and Stan wants to know you."

The man stepped forward and clasped his hand.

"I'm proud to know you, Valliant. I've got you to thank for my freedom, as well as for all the fine things you've done. If I can ever do anything for you, command me. I hope you'll consider me your friend."

"Sure," Jim said. "Heard about yuh. Glad to know yuh."

"And now," said Preston, "I'll be going. This is a time when three is a crowd. Besides, I've got to find the best wedding present in Cedar City!"

"That's for us, Jim dear!" whispered Jo Ann. "Just as soon as you can leave the hospital, we'll call on that eloquent preacher."

Jim made an amazing recovery.

"You go get the parson, honey," he said. "I'll be dressed in two shakes an' we'll—"

He embraced her with a strength that astonished her, and his lips found hers.

"For an invalid," gasped Jo Ann, "you're as strong as two men!"

"Invalid, heck! Go tell yore daddy he's got to give yuh away—to me, forever. Go tell Stan Preston we need a best man. Get Sally Martin for a bridesmaid an' round up that parson."

"How can I go while you're holding me so tight and kissing me breathless?"

But she made no effort to free herself from his embrace, and her lips ardently answered his.

Happy wanted excitement, he wanted adventure; and in Possum County there was nothing but bad times, and dull ones at that, until Happy stopped that furiously driven buckboard with the pretty girl in it.

A Chore for Happy

By R. Craig Christensen

NOTHING ever happened any more! Ranchers had become so poor they couldn't even find anything to fight over. Cattle were too starved to stray; nobody had enough money left to buy red-eye and get drunk and start ructions. Crime had vanished because there was no profit in it any more and, as a consequence, peace officers had been reduced until Possum County had just a sheriff without any deputies. He had his office at Possum Hollow, away up in one corner of the county, from which it would take him two days to get to the opposite corner. But as nothing ever happened, his presence wouldn't be required.

Nothing! No, that was wrong. Happy Harper sadly reflected that something had happened. He had been laid off at the Rabbit's Foot spread because Shorty Haines couldn't scrape together his wages any more. Right now he had six bits in his pocket besides his ten-dollar gold piece, which was his luck piece and therefore couldn't be spent. Happy had carried that coin for five years.

He was riding the grub line, with a fair prospect of staying on it a long time. That fact did not sadden him so much as the apparently dead state of the country. Happy needed the stimulus of activity to keep him in shape.

He was atop the Possum Trot Mountains. The sun had been down for an hour, and a lazy half-moon floated in a sea of cirrus clouds. It was a balmy

night, fragrant, warm but not too warm; it was the kind of night that was ideal for an outdoor dance, but there were no dances any more. The thought of dances made Happy think of girls. If, as looked reasonable, he had to leave Possum County, he might as well take a roundabout way and say good-by to the different girls he knew. He decided he would camp on the flat, Possum Trot, and in the morning head for the Twin C, to say good-by to Ann Sparling. Ann was a pretty good sort; she liked a little excitement, too.

Excitement! Well, maybe there was one chore to be done, a little job Happy would have attended to sooner, had he been foot-loose. Now that he had nothing else to do, he would do the chore—see if he couldn't put Greasy Dagget behind the penitentiary walls where he belonged.

He stopped his horse, casting about for a likely place to camp. While yet undecided, he heard the rumble of a fast driven wagon just ahead, coming toward him. The Possum Trot road was no asphalt affair; it was narrow, twisting and rutty. To drive at anything faster than a trot even in daylight was risky; to drive furiously after nightfall was just another way of asking for a ticket to a hospital.

And this wagon was coming at a reckless clip, judging by the noise. It made Happy scratch his head wonderingly. Here was something out of the ordinary, something to wonder at. Either the driver of that wagon was a fool, or else he had a mighty urgent reason for his wild driving. In either case, Happy reflected, it might be worth looking into.

In another minute he knew he was going to look into it. The wagon, a buckboard, came into view. On the spring seat sat three people, and it needed no eyes as keen as Happy's to see that the center occupant was a girl. A girl, he decided, had no business atop that bouncing spring seat on such a wild drive; it might lead to a broken neck.

That excuse, perhaps flimsy, was enough for Happy. When the two-horse team came abreast of him, he leaned over in the saddle and caught the near horse by the bridle, dragging it, and necessarily the other also, to a stop.

SUPPRESSED gasps, grunts and unintelligible gurgles came from the three people on the spring seat. Happy, without much cataloging, decided they were in a high state of excitement. He was neither a doctor nor a philosopher, but he knew excitement of that kind was not good for a person, though he didn't know it tended to high blood pressure.

"Evenin', folks," he drawled pleasantly, grinning up from under his flopping hat-brim. "I just sorta wondered if you all knew how dangerous this road is ahead! We had a waterspout here in prehistoric ages an' times got so bad people didn't bother to fix the road, leavin' a big hole that's shore tough on wheels—an' horses' legs. You folks'll get along faster if yuh drive slower."

It was kindness unappreciated. There was a glitter in the moonlight. An excited voice broke into speech that Happy thoroughly understood and appreciated, though some of the flavor was lacking in deference to the girl. Happy grinned, notwithstanding a bright gun was being held on his middle.

"So you're one of them crooks," the man wound up. "Well, we're just desperate enough to show you a thing or two. Let go of that bridle or I'll let daylight through you!"

Happy did not lose his friendly grin. The gun, he observed, looked like a short-barreled twenty-two. While he supposed it might kill if the bullet happened to strike just right, it did not carry the sinister menace of the range forty-five, such as he carried. And he had a sneaking idea that this man was not the shooting kind.

"No, I ain't one o' them crooks," he

denied, retaining his hold on the bridle. "Yuh ain't goin' to let daylight through me, an' I believe after such a fine night it'll be a nice mornin'. I'm Happy Harper, wanderin' cowpoke, an' I'm just tryin' to do yuh all a favor. I'm the only fellow in this county who's got enough life left in him to offer his neighbor a hand. I'm a top-hand trouble chaser, ahorse or afoot. I c'n talk faster an' longer an' say less even than a Congressman, an' I c'n draw faster an' shoot straighter than a bee c'n sting. I don't amount to nothin' an' I never will—"

"Don't you ever stop to draw a breath?" the girl between the two men asked, a hint of laughter in her voice.

"Shore, ma'am, yuhbetcha," Happy laughed. "I just wanted to set you folks at ease an' I don't know no better way than makin' a fool o' myself—not that that's so hard," he added, chuckling.

"Put your gun away, Joe," said the man on the other side of the girl, an old man, Happy saw. "I don't believe this man is one o' them crooks."

"I'm sure he's not," the girl defended warmly, drawing Happy's gaze and holding it. She was pretty, prettier than Ann Sparling, too darn pretty to be out in this starvation country.

"Maybe he might even help us," she added, coloring a little under his frank appraisal.

"Shore," Happy nodded hopefully. "If yo're in any kind o' trouble, just let me in on it. All I got is time, an' nothin' to spend it on."

"Well, I don't know." The younger man, the girl's brother, Happy decided, looked back uneasily. "Those crooks might be after us now. They might get here any minute."

"Let 'em come," Happy said, "I'll shoo 'em away."

"I'll tell you what's happened to us," the girl said impulsively. "I just don't believe all the men out here are like that gang of polecats we've run up against."

THE story was short and pathetic, the counterpart of others Happy had heard, and yet it made him curse under his breath. These people were from the Ohio onion fields. The girl was Linda McNack and the men her father and brother. Her father had a case of crippling rheumatism and her brother's lungs were so weak that the dry Western air was necessary for him.

Through an advertisement in a rural paper they had bought a hundred acres of land just below the Possum Trot Mountains. They had been assured it was good land and they had expected to raise turkeys there. But the land was nothing but gravel, while the house, "in good condition," was mostly poles and tar paper, boasting three "rooms." There was no water on the place, and they couldn't raise turkeys or anything else there. They had paid a thousand dollars cash and given a two-thousand-dollar mortgage. Now they couldn't live there and they couldn't leave, because they had nothing to leave on.

"That's shore tough," Happy sympathized. "I know that gravel bed; it ain't worth four bits a square mile. Who sold it to yuh all?"

"We bought it from the Possum Creek Land and Development Company, address Seven Oaks Grove," the girl told him. "But Seven Oaks is only a store and there's no land company there.

"But that isn't all. A man has been bothering us—me mostly. He's made the most debasing offers. He bullies Dad and Joe, and he—he—" She broke off in confusion.

"I understand, ma'am," Happy said softly. "An' now he's run yuh all off the place?"

"He was there today with three other men. He holds the mortgage and there's a payment due. He said if we couldn't pay, he'd hold me as security. We threatened him with the sheriff, but he just laughed. He said he would come back tonight and take me, and

we wouldn't be able to fight four outlaws."

"No, ma'am, yuh couldn't," Happy agreed, keeping his voice steady despite the hot anger within him.

"We decided to go to Possum Hollow and see the sheriff," Dad McNack explained. "There was nothin' else we could do."

"An' yuh couldn't do that," Happy said. "Yuh'd be stopped on the way. This jasper wouldn't let yuh in sight o' Possum Hollow. What sort o' a lookin' chap is he?"

"Average height, maybe forty," Linda McNack described. "Long nose, small black eyes, deep and narrow set. He speaks with a nasal twang."

"Greasy Dagget," Happy clipped his words short, a cold gleam coming into his eyes. "They gener'ly call him Greasy Maggot; I reckon he's yore land company, for he's the swindlin'-est hyderphoby cat west o' K. C. Runs, or used to run, the store at Seven Oaks, a stoppin' place for trail herds when there was any herds to drive. Yeah, I know him, though he mebbe wouldn't know me again, not havin' seen me for some years. He's a little flea a polecat scratched offa his back. Somebody orta shot him long ago, but forty-five shells cost money an' he ain't worth it."

"But what'll we do?" exclaimed Joe McNack. "You say the road will be barred, that we can't get to—"

"Leave it to me," Happy interrupted. "Yuh done found the help yuh all need. Just turn that team round an' drive back home an' I'll show yuh all how to take the fat offa Greasy Maggot."

Joe hesitated just a little. Linda prompted him firmly:

"Do as he says, Joe. We can trust him."

"Thank yuh, ma'am, yuh shore can," Happy assured her.

HAPPY rode ahead of the buckboard, scouting. If they were to hit any trouble, he meant to see it first. He was beginning to enjoy himself. It was pleasant to be doing something for Linda McNack; she was a little thoroughbred. And he relished the prospect of settling with Greasy Dagget.

They reached the house without incident, arriving there about eleven o'clock. The team was unhitched by the falling-down barn, and then they all went to the ramshackle house. Happy suggested that the McNacks go to bed while he made himself comfortable in a chair in the front room.

"But those men might come back," Linda objected dubiously. "They might hurt you."

"They won't hurt me," he assured her. "If Dagget said he'd come back tonight to get you, why, I reckon mebbe somebody might show up. But if anybody gets hurt, it'll be the other fellow. Just let me handle it!"

He had his way. When the McNacks had retired, he blew out the lamp and made himself comfortable in a reed rocker. He felt reasonably sure that, unless Greasy Dagget had been joking—and Greasy wasn't the joking kind—he'd try to make good his threat to carry off Linda.

Happy could beat a cat watching a mouse, at sitting still. One arm rested on the chair arm and his other hand was thrust into his pocket, fingering his ten-dollar luck piece. An idea was beginning to revolve in his head concerning that luck piece.

Presently he moved his head just a little. His keen ears caught a sound, the snapping of a twig somewhere. Alertly he waited.

Next came the faint sound of somebody brushing against the door. The knob grated a little, the lopsided door swung inward and a figure squeezed through. Another came close behind. A vagrant moonbean glinted from a gun the first man held in his hand. The men moved ahead a slow step.

"Drop that gun!"

Happy did not bother to put the whiplash sting into his voice that he could, and sometimes did, employ. He

felt contempt for those two sneaks, coming on a rat's errand.

The men realized he was not a McNack, and the gun thudded on the floor. Happy gave another order:

"Light the lamp. Don't get the skitter fidgets, I won't do much more'n bite yore ears off."

A match flared and the lamp was lit. The men let out a gasp.

"Hell, yuh ain't even got a gun out!"

"I got one on me an' I can draw it plenty fast. Let's hear yore account o' this visit."

"Er—ah—well, we jest came by an' we wanted a drink—"

"Liar," Happy interrupted flatly. "Yo're half soaked now an' yuh didn't come for a drink. Now I want to tell yuh somethin'— Say, yuh know who I am?" The question was prompted by an addition to Happy's budding idea.

"Ain't never saw yuh before," the men growled uncomfortably.

"I'm Lucky Burns, the guy who's made all those lucky gold strikes here in Arizony recent. I been prospectin' round here a coupla days, an' you two an' the scum behind yuh keep offa this place. I'm buyin' it tomorrow."

"Huh—buyin' it, this pile o' stones?"

"Yeah, buyin' it; but it ain't stones I'm buyin'. Dad McNack told me some weasels had bothered them an' I stayed up to tell you birds if yuh called, that yo're done. Yuh can ride now, but hereafter I shoots any animal, two-legged or otherwise, I see prowlin' round these here acres. An' it's Lucky Burns a-tellin' yuh all. Git now, an' don't stub yore toes."

The men needed no second order. They had heard, as had almost everybody, about Lucky Burns, the luckiest and toughest hombre in Arizona. They left precipitately and did not linger outside.

THEY were scarcely gone when an inside door opened and Linda McNack stepped into the room. In her hand she held the little twenty-two pistol. Excitement was mirrored on her face, but there was unbounded relief in her voice.

"I was afraid they might try to kill you," she said. "I stood right by the door, ready to come out and help you."

"What!" Happy hauled himself erect. "Yuh mean yuh'd bust into a fight to give me a hand? Heck, ma'am, yuh ain't no turkey raiser, yo're a born range woman. Yuh should own a cow ranch."

She sighed. "That's what I hoped we might do," she said wistfully. "But—" She shrugged her shoulders wearily.

"Well, yuh can't never tell," he said hopefully. "I've kinda been figgerin' that what this country needs is a little money to wake it up, to give ranchin' new life. I got me an idea an' I believe I'll go into the promotin' business for a while. Can't never tell what might happen when ideas sprout in my dome.

"Say, in case anybody should drop around when I ain't here, my name's Lucky Burns an' I done offered some twenty thousand dollars for this place. Don't forget that, will yuh?"

"Why—ah—no, but I don't understand. I believe you're figuring to get yourself into trouble for our sake and I don't want you to."

"No trouble, no trouble." Happy waved his hand, grinning. "I'm gonna become one o' them business boosters, thaw out some frozen capital an' put it to work. That just reminds me, if anybody, specially this Greasy Dagget, should drop in with a different tune an' want to buy this place, the price is twenty-five thousand dollars, spot cash. Remember that, not a penny less'n twenty-five thousand."

The girl sagged against the table, her eyes wide and searching his face, looking for the crinkle around his lips that would proclaim it a joke. But there was nothing but somber seriousness on his countenance and in his eyes. Nothing—yes, Linda detected something else, something that suddenly kindled a bright gleam in her

own orbs, sent a little color flooding into her cheeks.

"You really mean it?" She gasped.

"Yuhbetcha." He nodded so emphatically that she became confused and lowered her gaze. "We'll wake up Possum County."

"Gosh," she breathed. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry, or if I am awake or dreaming. It's impossible, but it sounds possible when you say it. But don't you risk any money for us."

"Yuh go get some sleep," he laughed. "I'll stretch out here on the floor for a cat nap. Course, I don't carry no big sums o' money on me, but what I do have I'm willin' to risk to start business boomin'." He had his hand in his pocket, fingering his luck piece and the two-bit and four-bit pieces along with it. His stare went past her, looking at what seemed a very old brass candlestick standing on a small table against the wall.

"I—I don't know," Linda said slowly. "I suddenly feel so hopeful, so happy. I'm glad now that we came out here." She turned before he could say anything and ran from the room.

Happy sat down in the rocker again and dozed some. He was outside at the first graying streaks of dawn, taking with him the candlestick from the little table. He found a lantern and rummaged around a good while, even doing some filing in the barn. When it was full daylight he walked to the edge of the hundred acres, carrying a shovel. He stopped below a spot where the bare rock of Possum Trot Mountain showed a reddish streak running clear to the top. There he dug a little in the ground and scattered some stuff that glinted like wheat kernels in the sunlight. Then he picked up a little fine gravel and put it into an empty tobacco sack, shaking it vigorously. After that he walked back toward the house, taking an erratic course that left heel prints in spots where bare ground showed.

Linda and the men were up when he entered the house. The girl was fixing breakfast and she turned to him apologetically.

"We're a little low on supplies right now," she said bravely. "We must get some more today."

Happy laughed and waved a hand carelessly. But a little stab went through him. He realized that they were faced with starvation, that they probably didn't have a cent and couldn't get credit at the store. Greasy Dagget would see to that.

"Don't yuh fret none about that," he reassured. "Now, what I was goin' to say was that after breakfast I got to take a pasear. I may not be back today, but I'll show up by an' by. If anybody should come snoopin' round the place, don't pay no attention. Stick close to the house an' if yuh have to, use that forty-five one o' them night callers so obligin'ly left behind."

He kept up a steady flow of conversation while they ate. Then he got his horse, mounted and rode away.

Early forenoon saw him entering the store at Seven Oaks. The man behind the counter was a shifty-eyed stranger.

"Howdy," Happy greeted. "Where's Greasy Dagget? Don't he run this shebang no more?"

"Naw, I bought him out. I dunno where Dagget went to. Stranger here, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah! Burns is the handle, Lucky Burns. I been prospectin' round here some."

"Lucky Burns." The man did not show the surprise he ordinarily would have felt at hearing the name, and Happy knew he had been informed. "Yuh don't mean to tell me yuh think yuh might strike gold hereabouts?"

"Already struck it," Happy lied convincingly. "Private property, though; got to buy the place outright. I'm on my way to Possum Hollow right now to get twenty-five thousand dollars to plank down for the place."

"Holy hoops—twenty-five thousand! Say, that must be a rich spot yuh struck. Whereabouts is it?"

"Richest I ever saw," Happy grinned teasingly. "Nope, can't give no location. Well, I jest wanted a sack o' Bull Durham, then I'll hit the trail for Possum Hollow. Orta make it back by day after tomorrow. Can't afford to sleep on this job. I got millions in sight, fella, millions."

The storekeeper filled his order with alacrity and Happy saw he was anxious to get rid of him. Walking toward the door, Happy pulled a bandanna from his pocket and apparently failed to notice a half-filled tobacco sack slipping out with the cloth and falling to the floor. He mounted his horse and rode away in the general direction of Possum Hollow.

He chuckled as he rode. His mirth became so pronounced that he broke into speech.

"Swallered it, by jinks! In less'n no time Greasy will know about it, an' if that crook ain't got that much money buried in some hole in the ground, I'm a magpie. He'll fall for that Lucky Burns stuff, an' that tobacco sack orta convince him."

EARLY in the afternoon the McNacks became aware of something unusual going on. They saw three riders circle around the place, coming finally to a stop behind the outbuildings, just below the mountains. There the men dismounted, walked around as if examining the ground and finally dropped to their knees. It looked as if they were picking up handfuls of dirt and looking at it closely.

Joe McNack hefted the forty-five Colt.

"If them crooks come here," he said grimly, "I'm cuttin' down on them. Wonder what's become o' Happy!"

"If they come here, I would hear what they have to say," Linda cautioned. "And don't forget, Happy is Lucky Burns."

"I been thinkin'," Joe stared darkly. "I don't trust him. I believe he's in cahoots with them others."

"He is not," Linda defended vehemently. "I'd trust him with my life."

Joe, suspicious, weighted down under troubles, was not convinced.

"If he ain't a crook, can you tell me what became of that gold candlestick from the little table? That thing was worth a hundred and fifty dollars; it was the only thing we had left we could get a dime on, and now we're plumb broke, faced with starvation."

Linda looked, and for the first time saw that the old candlestick was gone.

"That old heirloom had a story behind it," Joe went on bitterly. "It was said to be lucky, was supposed to bring wealth to the last owner. Well, we're the last owners because in a few days we'll be starved to death."

"I don't believe—" Linda began and stopped. The three men had ridden to the house and stopped outside. The man who had threatened her, Greasy Dagget, swung down and walked to the door. There was a grin on his face, supposed to be jovial.

"Howdy, folks," he forced a dry chuckle. "I been havin' some fun with you people, sorta 'nitiated yuh into our customs out here, but it's gone far 'nough now. Yo're real fightin' people, though, the kind we like out here, an' I aim to help yuh. I want to give yuh all a break now. I come to buy the place, got all the papers with me, ready to sign. I'll give yuh two thousand dollars an' tear up yore mortgage."

T-t-two thousand," Joe stammered. "Yes—"

"We're not selling," Linda broke in swiftly. "Rather, we're selling to another party. We've been offered better than twenty thousand."

A little gleam of avarice came into Greasy's eyes while a scowling frown spread over his face.

"That's a joke," Greasy laughed strainedly. "Nobody would pay that much. Who is this party?"

"Called himself Lucky Burns," Linda replied sweetly.

"Lucky Burns," Greasy repeated. "Say, that man's tried fer years to put the hooks into me. I'd spend my last dime to prevent it. Tell yuh what, I'll give yuh twenty-five thousand dollars fer the place—got the cash with me—providin' yuh give me possession before night. The place ain't worth a tenth o' that, an' I'm only doin' it to prevent bloodshed."

Dad McNack sat down on a chair, his body suddenly all a-tremble. Joe sagged against the wall and stared wide-eyed at Greasy Dagget. Linda said matter-of-factly:

"We can pull out before night, if you have the money and the papers."

"Don't say nothin' to nobody about this," Greasy implored. "People would laugh me plumb out o' the country if they heard I threw so much money away jist to keep the peace."

He walked out to his horse and began unstrapping two bulging saddle bags. His two men watched him, caught a certain look in his eyes and leisurely swung their horses around and rode away.

Joe McNack leaned close to Linda. "If he has that money, we'll never get out o' the country. We'll be held up an' killed."

"No, we won't," Linda assured. "Happy is on the job somewhere."

IT was about an hour after the moon had risen that Linda began to experience some of the doubts her father and brother had given voice to ever since they had driven away from the house. They were following the mountain road going to Possum Hollow, and were almost at the same spot where Happy had appeared the night before. In the buckboard were a few personal belongings and the twenty-five thousand dollars in cash paid by Greasy Dagget. Linda had hoped Happy would put in an appearance, but he had not shown up.

Presently she gave voice to an anguished little cry. Dad McNack groaned wheezily while a shivering sigh came from Joe. Three riders broke from the scrub woods. Three guns gleamed in the moonlight. Bandanna handkerchiefs covered the lower part of the three faces.

"Hoist 'em up!" a voice grated.

The two male McNacks complied with alacrity. Linda made a grab for the forty-five Colt that lay between her and Joe. One of the three outlaws caught it before she could fire. Then he had to drag her from the seat to subdue her.

Swift work followed. The bundle of money was found and transferred to a horse. Linda was placed on another horse, in front of one of the three men, who issued sharp orders to Joe McNack.

"You two hicks can drive on. When yuh hit Possum Hollow, tell the sheriff he'll find us somewhere over in Old Mexico, if he wants to foller us that far. If he wants more information, tell him to look for a feller callin' himself Lucky Burns. He's a right slick gent, that Lucky is."

He set his horse into a lope, and the three outlaws galloped away with Linda. Joe whipped the horses into a run down the road.

TWO hours later Linda was led into the shack that until that afternoon had been her home. Greasy Dagget sat at the table. He held a pie tin, partly filled with dirt and water, that he was slowly shaking. On a little piece of oilcloth by his elbow lay a little heap of wet, dully gleaming dust. He set the pan down and let out a little whoop when the three men entered with Linda.

"Ha!" He let out a croaky grunt. "Yuh got her, an' the package. Say, but is this a windfall! Shifty just rode away. He'll swear that you boys were here with me all evenin', so there ain't no chance to hang this on us. An' talk about gold dust!" He pointed to the little heap on the oil cloth.

The three men broke into excited talk. They gathered around, one of

them laying the bundle of money on the table. Linda stood between them, her face a dead white. Even on the wild ride back she had not fully lost faith in Happy. Now something heavy, beyond her power to withstand, seemed to tug at her heart-strings. She could not understand that gold. Had they been duped? Had Happy had a hand in it?

Her chain of weary thoughts was broken by one of the men.

"This Lucky Burns, when he comes back with the cash—what's on the cards for him?"

Greasy Dagget cackled.

"Say it with lead. Plunk him an' plant him, then let the law look for him. Don't worry, we got—"

The door pushed open. Happy stepped inside. His cold, level stare hit Greasy Dagget, made the crook rise stiffly. The three men spun around, hands darting for ready gun butts. They stopped when they saw Happy's gun covering them. A pulse-quickening stillness settled over the room.

"Howdy, Greasy!" Happy's voice cut with shivery coldness through the room. "Been a good while since I saw yuh, Greasy Maggot, seven years, I believe, since yuh swindled my mother out o' every penny she owned. I swore then I'd put yuh behind the bars some day, an' I reckon the time has come. Yo're hooked, Greasy, an' you three gents too. It won't pay to try for yore guns. I reckon yuh've heard about Happy Harper's shootin'. Miss Linda, if yuh don't mind, will yuh get the rope off my horse? Oh yeah, Greasy, I'm known as Lucky Burns right now."

LINDA and Happy were out in the moonlight, sitting on a sagging bench. The four outlaws were tied up in the house. Happy was talking.

"It was Lucky Burns' reputation done the trick," he was saying. "That an' Greasy's natural greed. I had a ten-dollar gold piece that I thought was lucky an' I filed that up, mixed it with a little gravel an' put it in a tobacco sack that I dropped in the store. Then I swiped yore brass candlestick an' filed it up too an' mixed it in some dirt I dug loose. I was a little worried for fear Greasy mightn't be fooled by the brass, it bein' such an old trick too, but I reckon Lucky Burns' rep helped—"

"But that candlestick was gold," Linda broke in. "That was our luck piece."

"It was! Well, I'll be doggoned! No wonder it worked when there was two luck pieces. Well, anyhow, I knew Greasy. I knew he'd never let that money get away, so I just watched his men an' trailed them. I was in the woods an' saw the hold-up, all ready to step in if I was needed. I told yore dad an' Joe to take their time an' I reckon they'll be here by an' by. Then I lammed out after you an' now I reckon yuh can shore start a turkey ranch or any other kind o' ranch with that twenty-five thousand dollars."

"But that isn't all ours," Linda protested. "One luck piece was yours and half the money goes to you. Anyhow, I don't want to raise turkeys. I want to raise cows, but neither Dad nor Joe knows anything about ranching."

"I don't want any o' that money," Happy said. "But I know ranchin'. I'll work for wages an' help yuh."

"You'll work as a partner or not at all," Linda protested.

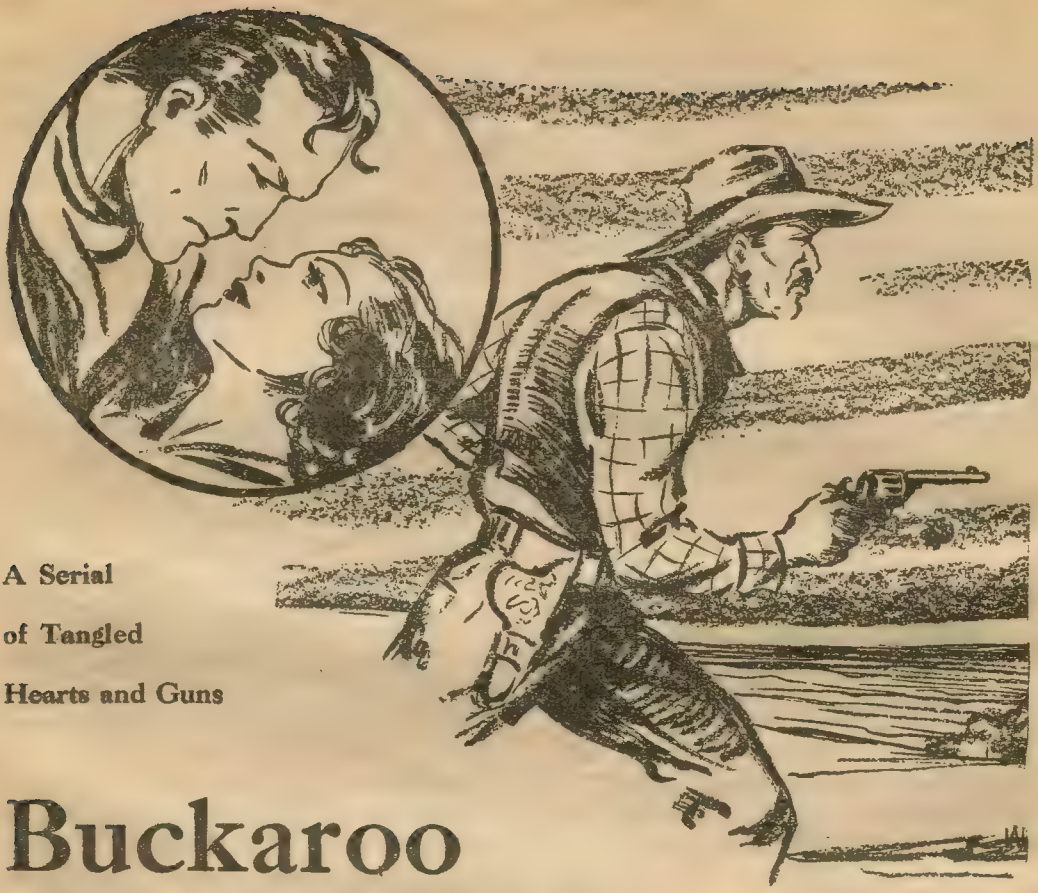
"But—but—Linda," Happy stammered, "I can't take that money. I want—I want—er—I—"

"Yes," Linda prompted softly.

"I want you," Happy cried desperately. "I done been in love with yuh a long, long time, Linda, long before I ever saw yuh."

The sagging bench threw Linda's weight against him. A little quivering sigh broke from her lips, and of a sudden Happy's arm was around her shoulders, pulling her still closer.

Something had happened—but Happy was too happy to think about it!



A Serial of Tangled Hearts and Guns

Buckaroo Clan

By Clee Woods

Conclusion

CHAPTER XXXII

Posse's Treachery

KIRK knew that at no time during the past hectic week of fierce struggle had he been so near death as now. Nor had Vee ever been in such peril, not even in the raging river from which he had just dragged her. She showed no sign of recovering consciousness, yet he didn't think that she had been drowned in the brief time she had been tossed about in the frothing water.

What could he do to save her from this man with the gun? Not save himself, but just her. He froze in his tracks just as he had frozen when Furlong's voice had caught him, while one hopeless move after another flashed through his mind like darts of electric sparks. None would do.

"Vee's about drowned," he told Furlong, and his voice sounded far off to his water-filled ears. "Let me drain the water out of her lungs and get her breath started again."

"I'll do the handling of Vee," Furlong retorted. A faint curl of satisfaction showed at the right corner of his lips. He called sideways to Sonora Slim and Big Bill, "You boys step back a few yards. I want to ask Macalpine a question."

He bent his face forward, though he was watching every twitch of Kirk's

muscles, and his gun never wavered from the buckaroo's breast. Kirk stood there with water trickling from his clothing and off the end of his holster. He knew that he hadn't a chance in the world to leap at Furlong and clinch with him, or to get at a gun. An attempt to do either would bring spurts of fire from the hungry weapons of Sonora Slim and Big Bill.

Furlong was whispering, "Just how many, and who, knows the location of that gold mine? You whisper your answer. And whisper it damn quick, too!"

Instantly, Kirk knew the reason for that question. Furlong wanted to wipe them out entirely, one way or another, so the treasure would be his own secret until he could get a deed some way or another to the patented land on which it lay.

"Look out, Boss," Sonora Slim cautioned. "They's somebody on the far bank of the river."

The warning came almost too late. A rifle cracked from the Macalpine side of the river. Furlong jumped backward. The bullet grazed his cheek. It was mighty good shooting in the gloom of the rain and approaching night. As

Furlong moved, he fired at Kirk. Evidently he had made up his mind to kill Kirk while he had him under his gun, and not wait for the answer to his question.

The forty-five slug ripped into Kirk's left side, trying for the heart. But Kirk was diving to the right, hand digging desperately for his own gun. Even at that, Furlong's bullet hit hard enough against a rib to send that side numb momentarily. Sonora Slim fired too. His hasty shot cut under Kirk's left arm and furrowed the side lightly.

In that one dire second as he was going down, Kirk noted the movement of all three men and measured the respective danger from each, all in one flash of comprehension. Furlong, smoking gun in his hand, was plunging for the alder brush on the river bank. Big Bill was falling to the ground, faking a mortal wound. But Kirk nor nobody else had shot at him. Sonora Slim was neither leaping for cover nor faking death. He just hunched down as he fired, face twisted hard. He was the man to get first, much as Kirk wanted to kill Furlong here and now.

Kirk brought his Colt jumping up sideways. It spurted a pale flame through the rain. Slim's gun was coughing out its second shot. But Kirk's bullet hit him some place in the right side of the body, jerking his shoulder about enough to make him miss by inches. Now, should he finish Slim or get Furlong, whose head and shoulders were going into the brush? Again Kirk weighed the question in a fraction of time—and put a bullet flush into Slim for his decision.

Then he whipped his gun about and fired into the brush after Furlong. Three times he fanned his shots in a swift bombardment of the brush. He saved the last shot in his gun and leaped across to snatch Sonora Slim's gun from his dead hand. It had four shots left.

He got it and started to rush into the brush after Furlong. He meant to settle with Doc Furlong this moment, while he had him here so close to gun. But Kirk passed too near Big Bill. The fake nester may have thought Kirk's rush was for him. He suddenly came to life and flung his arms about Kirk's legs.

That made Kirk crash downward, and Big Bill grappled with him in a furious whirlwind of action. Kirk expected every second that Furlong would break from the brush to finish off the fight in short order. But he couldn't see Furlong yet and he must rid himself of this grizzly bear antagonist. He lashed his right-hand gun down and fired. But Big Bill knocked his gun muzzle aside. Then Bill grappled frantically for the gun taken from Slim, in Kirk's left. He got hold of Kirk's wrist. Kirk hit him across the head with the empty gun in his free hand. Yet that didn't stop the savage man. Kirk walloped him again, hoping fervently that Furlong wasn't taking aim on him from the brush. Big Bill's attack slowed at that second blow, and Kirk let him have another.

That knocked Big Bill cold. Kirk tore loose his left hand and fell flat on the ground. From that position, behind Slim's body, he looked for Furlong. Still the would-be cow king had not shown himself. Kirk began to hope that he had hit him.

Just then six men came rushing out of the willows which lined a tiny rivulet emptying into the river twenty yards above. Furlong henchmen, tough hombres all! And coming to the rescue of their boss! With only five shots left and no time to load, Kirk knew he didn't stand any chance at all against them, cornered there on the river bank as he was, with no more cover than a slim dead man's body. And a free-for-all fight would certainly put Vee in peril from flying lead. She still lay with her boot toes dangling into the water, oblivious to the fight around her.

Several Macalpine rifles cracked from across the river. None of the six Furlong men seemed to be touched, but the volley sent them darting into the willows and alders on the river's edge. Thus shielded, they could work all too

close to Kirk's position. Without a second's hesitation, Kirk decided to get out of there before the men could begin shooting at him.

He sprang to Vee, snatched her up in his arms and tore through the willows and alders which lined the bank downstream. Not a bullet cut after him. He leaped across an open space and into some rocks farther back toward the hillside. Two guns did bark at him in that brief spurt in the open. One bullet zipped past his forehead and another tore off the tip end of his boot for him.

After that there came a brief lull. Kirk ignored the numb toes and the stiff pain in his left side, where a rib had been broken by Furlong's first shot. He carried Vee back up through the brush on a run, and gained some rough, high ground overlooking the bottom opposite the former site of the bridge.

Nothing but the popping of rifles from the Macalpine side of the river kept the Furlong pack from running him down swiftly. The 220 men were after him all right, but they lost time dodging around every open spot they came to on the rising hillside. Then, too, they had to look out for Bailey's force just above there in the bottom. Soon Kirk had thrown them off his trail for the time being.

But he was in a dire situation indeed. Here he was on the enemy side of the river, with Vee to take care of somehow. He slipped in between two huge rocks where a young bull-pine blocked one end of the opening, and tried to revive her. On the retreat here, he had carried her so that her lungs would drain of what little water had gone into them. Now he manipulated her arms to restore breathing. It took only a moment. In another he had her sitting up, asking a hasty, broken question.

He didn't answer. He was on his feet, peering out through the pine branches at a strange scene below him some four or five hundred yards. Vee was still so weak she hardly could rise. But she caught hold of his breeches' leg, pulled herself onto her feet and held onto him while she looked to see what so absorbed his attention.

Through the increasing pour of rain men moved below in what seemed to her a strange phantasy, as though she and Kirk were miles away from them. True to his promise to fight Furlong, Sheriff Bailey was moving to corner his enemy's smaller force. Apparently, Bailey had not been aware of the presence of the Furlong faction until they had begun the fight with Kirk. Furlong had recalled his men from hunting Kirk by now. They could chase him down after this graver threat was met.

Bailey had with him at the moment eighteen men. This included his seven young volunteers from Granite City, and the eleven new men whom he had engaged as they had come to him apparently disgusted from their fruitless gold hunt in the rain. Across the bottom from Bailey's force, Furlong had only a total of seven henchmen lined up behind rocks, trees and logs. Perhaps two or three more were still in the brush, looking for Kirk and Vee.

"Give up, Furlong, or here I come," Bailey shouted out his challenge.

"If you want me," Furlong flung back, "come and get me!"

Bailey was in dead earnest. With eighteen men against Furlong's eight, why couldn't he whip him? Even with that advantage, though, Bailey was not foolish. He gave orders to his various men for an advance from two sides. He shouted lustily across the river to the Macalpine boys there, asking them to rake the third side of Furlong's little band with rifle fire. Kirk didn't believe his brothers could hear that far across the roar of the water, and he doubted that they would cooperate with Bailey if they did.

Bailey nevertheless got his men started. Barely started, though, and no more. Bailey's new recruits, the disgusted gold hunters, fell in behind the seven young fellows who first had come from Granite City with Bailey in all good faith. The moment the eleven new men got behind, they turned their

guns on the backs of the seven youths and Bailey.

"We're Furlong men," one of them shouted. "Stick up yore mitts, and damn quick!"

Caught cold! But it was typical Furlong doings, this hiring of crooked men to come over and pretend to enlist in the enemy's force. Bailey was both outnumbered and trapped. He could not help knowing, though, that to surrender meant his own death at Furlong's hands.

"Boys," he cried, "don't give up—let's fight 'em!"

He had a gun in his hand already. He flashed it up and fired at his nearest enemy. No doubt he thought his youthful helpers would join him in in the life-and-death battle. But to these inexperienced youngsters it was not a matter of life and death for them. They did not know of all the bitter hates and schemes which lay beneath the surface. Seemingly, they thought that they needed only to surrender. Every one of them flung his hands heavenward and stood stock still. It saved their lives, too.

Bailey wounded his man with his first shot. Then he went running off at a tangent, trying to reach a rotten log sagged across a rock. He fired swiftly with both hands as he ran.

Half a dozen guns cut loose at him. They hit him and knocked him over backward. He got up, crazed by the knowledge that he was mortally wounded, and tried to charge back at his treacherous foes. But another volley ripped out at him. He went over backward once more.

Even yet he was not through. The sheer animal life in his burly body was so strong that he was able to fling himself about and pull up on one elbow. In that position he fired the last two shots in his gun in blind desperation at the treacherous men whom he had hired to clean out Doc Furlong. Not until his gun went empty did they get him. Then he sank down, face flat on the ground, a pitiful heap of lifeless flesh. And the rain kept pouring down onto him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Rawhide Kisses

VEE had turned her face away from the sight. Kirk came back to her. Things were moving fast toward the end. Somebody else's finish was very near. Even the elements seemed leagued with the invisible forces to hasten a final showdown. The storm was moving down from the mountain. Thunder crashed from the mountain-tops in terrific crescendos; lightning leaped through the skies and darted earthward in forked and zigzagging streams.

"It's our turn next," Kirk told Vee. "I mean, for us boys. Furlong has to be stopped now or never."

"But you're away from your brothers, on this side," Vee reminded him in quick anxiety. "Let it wait till—"

"It can't wait," Kirk ruled. "I've waited too long now."

"Then I—"

He stopped her again with, "From now on, Vee, yo're out of it. Yuh've headed into enough danger already—too much. I'm makin' shore yuh stay out of it this time by tyin' yuh up here till I get back."

He knew she would follow him if she could, and so he must forcibly prevent her. He was going into more danger than he ever before had faced. Through the gloom of rain and coming night she looked up at him. Kirk was reminded of the moment on the mountain road, when he had lost his head and snatched her into his arms. He couldn't be as foolish as that any more. He jerked a piggin' string from his pocket and pulled her rather roughly back to the pine tree. His grip on her wrist was almost torture, but she didn't complain.

"I'll tie yuh loose," he told her, "so yuh can work yoreself free in half an hour or so."

"You mean," Vee said slowly, "so I can work loose in case you—you get killed."

He did not answer. With hands awkward and trembling, he faced her

toward the tree and tied her arms round it. Her white, wet face remained upturned to his—tragic now, but still beautiful.

"Kirk," she said, "I want to confess something to you before you go."

He looked at her in amazement.

She meant to tell him of her foolish wish to hurt him the time she kissed Bruce when she had thought him unconscious. But Kirk never gave her the chance.

"Tell me nothin', Vee," he snapped back at her, and she gave a start at the savageness in his tone.

He started to stride away. Then all at once his reason left him again. He whirled back and threw his arms about her.

"Bruce or no Bruce," he cried, "I've got this one crazy minute. Yo're mine now, see? Mine, while yo're tied here and can't get away from me! Yes, I know, mebbe I won't live through the next hour. That's why I'm not givin' a damn for Bruce or any other man on earth this one minute!"

His arms slid between her and the tree and gripped her to him in crushing abandon. He kissed her, again and again, madly, utterly lost in the agonizing ecstasy of that last parting. He did intend it to be the last parting. He might be killed. But if not, he meant to be gone forever before she could get loose.

But to his further consternation, she was not denying him her lips; not protesting. No, she was giving him kiss for kiss, and there was a fierce, strange light flaming in her black eyes.

He thought she knew he would not live through the coming fight and therefore was merely trying to send him to his death with a morsel of happiness. Shamed and suddenly overcome by the enormity of forcing his lips upon a girl helplessly tied up, he tore his arms away and broke down the hillside. Vee tried to call something to him, but a crash of thunder drowned her words. Before she could make herself heard after the thunder had rolled away, he was out of earshot, bounding down the rough, steep slope in a sort of mad daze.

But in a moment he forced himself back to realities. He was going to a fight, and a final showdown fight at that. And he meant to get Furlong first, whatever might come after that.

As he drew nearer his enemies, though, more sane reasoning returned to him. No use in hurling himself at Furlong's big force, now twenty men counting Furlong himself, until he had some sort of chance.

The seven young Bailey men who had surrendered had been marched over into the brush at the foot of the slope. Kirk supposed that they would be tied up there until the main fray was over. Furlong also must have foreseen an end to the bitter struggle, but an end with him completely in the saddle, of course.

Kirk slipped down through the brush. He hoped to find the seven boys under only a light guard while Furlong returned to the river with his main force. Kirk reasoned that if he could succeed in releasing the young captives, they would add materially to his force even though all of them could not be supplied with guns, at first.

But he couldn't find the prisoners, nor any enemy force either. He searched back and forth until it grew so dark he couldn't see. By now the rain was pouring down in sheets. The river was rising fast. Kirk feared that his brothers might be so foolhardy as to try to cross it and come to his aid, under cover of darkness. But the darkness that afforded them cover would also add peril to the task of swimming the raging stream.

He left the woods and moved out across the low sag of ground where the river had once run. Now it was grass covered, and had a few half-grown trees here and there. The river had gotten so high that six inches of water were running through here. Kirk hardly noticed that. He had to be careful not to be seen out in the open when the lightning flashed, so he crawled most of the way. He kept his ears strained for some sound

of his enemies, and at each flash of lightning he darted glances here and there.

He was within thirty yards of the river's bank when a prolonged flash of lightning showed him a new Furlong trick in swift, plain detail. Down beneath a big cottonwood perhaps sixty yards below him, Furlong and about ten men were ganged around a man on a horse. They had a rope about his neck and the rope ran up to a limb. It looked as though they were getting ready to whack the horse from under him.

At that sight, Kirk's teeth ground together hard. Instantly, Kirk concluded that one of his brothers had succeeded in swimming the river somehow, then had gotten caught and was being hanged. Well, he would stop that little necktie party. He gripped the gun in his hand and started for the lynchers.

This march in the inky blackness took him nearer the river bank. Now he could hear the loud shouts and cries of the lynchers. But they were calling his own name. That puzzled Kirk for a moment. Then it came to him that this was a sham lynching for some purpose, because all of them knew they didn't have Kirk Macalpine's neck in that noose, as their cries proclaimed. Kirk's eyes turned in the direction of the Macalpine camp across the river, although he couldn't see two feet in the darkness.

But just then a flash of lightning lit up the river on both sides. Then Kirk saw the trick in more detail. Up along the river he spied three men stationed at intervals of about ten yards apart, each behind some scant cover so as not to be noticed from the opposite bank. He guessed there were more.

That told the story. Furlong was faking a necktie party and pretending to have Kirk Macalpine as the chief guest, just to excite the other Macalpines into trying to cross the river to save him. It was doubtful if any of them could make it. But if any or all should get over, Furlong probably had half his force stationed up along the river to get them at the first flash of lightning after they got within close range.

Kirk didn't wait to see whether his brothers would try to swim the river or not. He knew they would. And he must stop them. He splashed through the water, headed upstream. When the boys tried to swim their horses over, they would go up the river for a good distance in order to make allowance for drifting with the current.

Kirk reached the upper end of the tiny bottom where the old creek bed came around a high shoulder of rock. From there he yelled across in the blackness. Then a flash of lightning showed him that he had been half a minute too late. Five horsemen were already in the river, forcing their mounts into the swift current. Furlong's trick had worked. It was bringing five Macalpines to their death, either by drowning or by the hot lead that would greet any who might get across.

Kirk yelled at them frantically to stay back. The blackness rushed back upon the river and he couldn't tell whether they had heard him or not. He kept on shouting his frantic warning, but he had to start running down the bank of the stream in order to keep pace with the horses' downward sweep in the water.

This course took him angling across the neck of the old river bed. The water here was running two feet deep. He saw that it soon would be so high as to cut off from the mainland the meager rise of ground along the river bank where the Furlong men were stationed. But he would have time to stop his brothers and still get back to the hillside, he felt sure. He had to stop the boys anyway, whether he got back or not. If he got cut off and the water became too deep, he could climb one of the two trees along the bank, a small pine and a big cottonwood farther down. That is, if Furlong's men hadn't climbed them ahead of him.

Kirk's shouts to his brothers were bound to be heard by the nearest Furlong men. He couldn't help that, either. He would warn the boys first, and then

look out for anybody who objected to his presence here. So he pushed through the water and on out along the narrow little strip of ground along the bank. He yelled almost continuously across the water, through cupped hands.

"Thank God!" he said fervently.

A brief flash of lightning showed him two brothers turning back. They had heard him. Now they would relay the warning to the others, and all could get turned around before they got too far out in the sweeping current. Their horses could swim back through the slower water on their side. The main rush and rage of the water was over on Kirk's side. In fact, he kept back a little from the bank, guided by the water's sound, for fear of running onto ground already undermined by the current.

Now what must he do? The only sane answer was obvious. He must hurry back to the mainland and not get penned up over here with twenty enemies on a strip of land far too small to hold him and them very long even in such darkness. But Kirk Macalpine wasn't doing many sane things tonight. In his mad way, he had said good-by to Vee. All he wanted to do now was to fight it out with Doc Furlong and then think about going back if life was still left in his body. He had a feeling that the storm was with him and that he ought to fight on while it lasted, instead of pulling back and waiting for Furlong to rally all his men after the storm was over. So he kept on, rash but not foolhardy in his movements.

The next dart of lightning showed him several Furlong men hurrying down along the bank. They were returning to their comrades after their trick had failed. For a time after that there came only very brief jabs of light, too short and indistinct for him to see much. But he made out that at least part of the enemy men were going to try to get across to the mainland before they got trapped on the strip of bank.

Kirk knew that the water cutting through between him and the hillside was growing higher every minute. He could hear it take on a roar rivaling that of the main stream. It began to lap in close to his feet. Still he moved on toward the retreating men. And he kept his eyes ready for the next darting light.

It came, long and vivid. Once more everything was lighted up. The water had cut in deep between Kirk and the big cottonwood tree on the river bank, making two islands of the strip of land. Some of the men were climbing the cottonwood. Five more were wading out into the channel, and two were on the only horse they had. This pair was Furlong and Big Bill, who evidently had been revived little the worse for the pistol-whipping which Kirk had given him.

The channel water had come through with a rush. Now it was too high for any man or horse to wade it. The horse might swim it, though, before the current swept him down into the brushy bottom below, and again he might not.

But something more than high water was blocking escape for Furlong from the danger zone. Over on the mainland slope were Vee and the seven young men who had been with Bailey before he met his tragic end. After working loose herself, Vee had found the captives and turned them loose too. Now they were here chiefly to see about Kirk, but also to fight Furlong. Kirk was surprised to see that they had guns. They must have gotten hold of their own weapons again, from where the Furlong men had left them.

Although the lightning lasted no more than three seconds, two or three of these boys whipped up their guns and fired as the darkness rushed back. Kirk didn't see how they could have hit anything. In a moment he heard the wild, despairing scream of a man knowing he was going to his death. The current had gotten one of the waders.

For a full minute after that, no more lightning lit up the scene. Kirk shifted down lower. He was hoping to be near Furlong when the next lightning broke. By keeping down in the water except

for his head and gunhand, he could do a lot of damage to any of them whom he might be near. Nor was his move so reckless as it might seem. They could not shoot until they located him and determined that he was not one of their own number. A flash of lightning would hardly give time for that. He himself could shoot anybody he saw out there.

When at last he did get another glimpse, only two men were in sight near him. There were Furlong, on the horse, and Big Bill, walking beside it, holding to the horn. Kirk thought he saw two or three men much farther down in the water. These were moving toward the big cottonwood where the fake lynching had been staged.

The lower island strip had already been covered with water. Therefore the cottonwood tree seemed the only haven for the men down there. Kirk thought that the current between him and them had already grown too strong for them to breast it and gain his island, which by now had been reduced in size and shape to something like the top of a long hayrick. But Furlong and Big Bill were headed for Kirk's retreat. With the horse, they could make it. His speck of an island certainly was the safest place, because that huge cottonwood on the other former island stood on the river's very edge, and some of its roots already had been uncovered by a previous flood. And it was clear now that a very heavy cloudburst had occurred in the mountains just above. It was hard telling how high the water would get, but the half-grown pine tree was so high and well rooted it was certain to be safe.

The rapid, angry rise of water forced Kirk to shift back to this pine tree. He moved low in the water, though, so as not to get caught unawares by a sudden illumination of the skies.

What he never was to know was the fact that Furlong's newly recruited men had resented bitterly his sneaking off on the only horse without giving any of them except his body-guard a comradely chance at it when the lone animal may have meant all the difference between life and death. One had taken a shot at him as they made off. Then, too, Furlong hadn't seen him here yet. For all Furlong knew, Kirk could have been on the mainland by now, or drowned.

By pushing squarely across the current, Kirk reached the upper end of his island. There he waited, just below the pine tree. He didn't even hide behind the tree. Let it be a fair fight!

CHAPTER XXXIV

Lightning Showdown

ANOTHER dark spell ensued. Kirk reckoned the time as sufficient for the pair to reach the lower end of the land strip. Now they would fight when heaven furnished the light. The fact that Big Bill was there to be dealt with too was only an incidental matter to Kirk.

While he waited, Kirk heard a chorus of loud, frightened cries, then more frantic screams. He guessed the cause. The big cottonwood had been undermined by the worst flood waters No Woman River had ever seen. Every man in the tree would be swept downstream. As it turned out, four escaped with their lives, miraculously.

For the time being, though, it left Furlong with just one henchman, Big Bill. For that pair Kirk waited, tense and impatient.

Came a tremor of light. The water was illuminated for a bare fraction of a second, but he couldn't see any sign of the two men where he expected them.

Then the whole heavens seemed to open forth in a long, vivid explosion of light. Kirk saw his men, now, but they had separated. Big Bill was off to the buckaroo's right, Furlong to his left.

Kirk knew his limitations with a gun. He had never practiced firing with both hands at once, and that does take practice. Just now he wanted one man even if it cost him his life from the trigger-finger of another. With cool, reckless courage he ignored Big Bill for the first

two seconds and concentrated his gun skill on Furlong.

Three guns roared almost together. But Kirk's spoke a fifth of a second sooner and that was time enough. Furlong and Big Bill had been expecting to find Kirk down in the water, after his defiant shout to them that he was there and gunning for them. They never expected to find him standing up in full view on the water-free soil. That had given Kirk a bare advantage

Kirk's first bullet caught Doc Furlong in the forehead only a little off center. So cool a fight was he making that he never waited to see whether he had hit Furlong or not. He knew he had gotten him. He whirled his gun muzzle onto Big Bill.

That gunman's first bullet had missed Kirk by inches, because he had to shift his six-shooter muzzle to a higher angle above the water, and do it in too nervous haste. The slug went slightly too far to the left. Kirk fired his second shot before Big Bill could trigger again. This time there was no answer from Big Bill's gun. Kirk waited a moment for more light. A new flash showed him only the rolling, frothing water. It was washing Big Bill's body after his boss.

Peace and reason would come back to No Woman Valley. Bitter passion had been burned away by hot lead and washed away in the storm. Now neutral people would listen to the Macalpine story, and allow it to be supported by the detailed evidence which they had picked up. Furlong's sinister hand would show too plainly through it all for him to have one honest supporter left. And Lash Bailey would come forth as a mere tool of the man who had schemed to rule as cow king.

So reasoned Kirk as he stood there in the dark. The victor. But one more thing he did not know of, which was to clinch all this. Lash Bailey had been bent on getting Furlong, even after death if he himself got killed. So the whole country knew before dark the next night that he had left behind with his friend Hogart, the county commissioner, a sealed confession, to be opened only in case of his death.

It told how Furlong had shot Donald Macalpine from beneath the wagon, and of many other lawless acts which Furlong had planned and Bailey carried out. Bailey could not tell positively of Furlong's engineering the ambush slaying of Sheriff Hinton, but he did relate how he had seen five Furlong men, including Sonora Slim and Soapy Keeler, dashing away from the scene almost while the echoes of their guns resounded.

But, although ignorant at the moment of Bailey's confession, Kirk stood there in the dark, strangely quiet and satisfied as to what he had done. People would believe in him and his brothers. He felt it. No need now to rush the cattle on to market. There was no Furlong to buy the Widow Clark's ranch.

So Kirk resolved to get out in the morning, to stay long gone. Over across the channel was Vee, Bruce's girl. Bruce would get well, and not find his older brother here to worry him. Kirk tried to conjure up some satisfaction in his resolution to drift away from No Woman Valley and let Bruce have her.

It was forgotten a moment as he realized that a girl's cry was being repeated through the roar of the waters. An agonizing, terrified cry. He heard his own name called twice then: "Are you there? Did you win, Kirk?"

That was right, they would want to know over there who had won the gunfight. So would his brothers. It had not occurred to him before. He let out a wild, savage cowboy yell to Vee. Then he turned and repeated it across the river to his own camp. As if for an echo, he heard Vee's cry again coming over the rolling waters, "Thank God, Kirk! And I can't wait any longer to tell you that it's you I love. Just you!"

And standing there wet, weary, bleeding from two wounds about which he thought nothing, Kirk Macalpine laughed, low, strangely, but with a deep, new joy. He would live in the Valley the rest of his life, with her!

(The End)

The

In this article Jack Potter will give you a first-hand story of a trail drive in the old days, from Texas to Nebraska, during which a tenderfoot "made good."

"ARE you the conductor of this herd? I would like to get to Ogallala on the main U. P. line. If you'll let me go along, I can ride in the caboose with the chef and help with churning." Those were the words spoken to me by the king of all tenderfeet. I took one look at his clothes and, considering his speech surmised that he was a railroader.

"Yes I am," he admitted. "I was born in a box car on a construction job on a siding near St. Louis."

We were in Wallace, Kansas, a division point on the Kansas Pacific between Abilene, Kansas, and Denver, and were en route from San Antonio, Texas, to Ogallala, Nebraska. Practically the only way to get transportation to the North in those times was to throw in with a freighter's outfit or a trail herd. It seemed that on this trip we had more than the usual number of passengers going with us either part or all of the way, although most of our guests unloaded at Dodge City.

All the way through Texas I had been bothered with rangers and trail cutters. Every now and then a detective would throw in with us, traveling a day or two and checking up on our crew.

When we left Wallace midway between Ogallala and Dodge City, even with our tenderfoot we were down to

Story of K. P.

By Jack Potter

less than our regular crew, two of the group having left us at Dodge City. However, I considered that, since the country was so sparsely settled and since the trail between Wallace and Ogallala was the best on the drive, we would go on without hiring additional men.

WHEN our tenderfoot came to camp, he was wearing a railroader's cap, and his overalls were black and oily. He had every appearance of being a roundhouse man. I sent him back to town and told him to buy a hat, as his face would burn without one. In a little while he came back with a Derby. I told him that he hadn't helped matters much, because one of those things made a great target for the boys to practice shooting.

The boys were looking forward to having a great time working this tenderfoot over, but they were not a bit hasty. There would be plenty of time between Wallace and Ogallala to give the railroader a correct introduction into the ways of the West.

Finally he climbed into the wagon with the cook and we moved on. I think that during the afternoon I was called conductor about fifty times, and in retaliation we named the tenderfoot "Kansas Pacific." This was later shortened to K. P. Our dirty old cook the tenderfoot had already named the chef.

That afternoon the cook had supper early and hollered at the top of his lungs, "Come and git it or I'll throw it out!" Our tenderfoot was a little awkward about getting started off right; but after he was shown where to get his plate and cup, he filled it up with everything in sight and sat down leaning on a wagon wheel. When he had eaten the first batch he asked the cook if it was customary for a fellow to eat all he wanted, because this was his first meal he had ever eaten that was served in this manner; always before this his food had been measured up to him. It was always real entertainment to watch a tenderfoot eat his first meal at the chuck wagon.

The boys hesitated about framing K. P. There were fifteen more days of travel ahead and it was wise to get a line-up on a few of his weak points before doing much.

We started out the next morning while loading the bedding and fixing to move. The tenderfoot called the cook chef a dozen times. The boys got tired of calling me Conductor and shortened to Con, and Kansas Pacific was entirely K. P. now.

After traveling for three days, our guest had persuaded us to let him ride a horse and help with the cattle. We had stopped at noon on the Beaver and when we got ready to leave camp the herd had grazed down-stream nearly a mile. We roped out a small pony belonging to one of the boys who had returned from Dodge City, an animal known as the hardest-mouthed pony in the whole *remuda*.

We found an extra saddle and, after saddling the pony, told old K. P. to mount. There was an old camp nearby that had been made either by soldiers or by an immigrant outfit, which had left a five-gallon oil can among the debris. One of the boys tied one end of his rope around it and the other end to K. P.'s saddle horn. When K. P. mounted and his horse started off, the boys threw the tin can in behind K. P.

Old K. P. had turned his reins loose and was holding on to the saddle horn. He ran for about a mile, until he was nearing the herd, when one of the boys got in front of him and circled him into the sand hills to keep him from stampeding the cattle. No one followed him, but in about half an hour one of the boys became anxious and suggested that I had better go out and look for the horse.

About that time I saw K. P. walking toward the camp, leading the horse. He was in a fine humor. He said that when we left camp and the pony started running he throwed on the brakes. The speed he was making was so great, what with going down grade, that he couldn't make the brakes hold but when he started out into the sand hills up grade, he applied the brakes and they stuck.

NEXT day at noon the boys staged a big fight among themselves. In the morning they left camp quarreling and cursing the chef. At noon they came in in a very bad humor, all very silent. The cook had a pair of .45's in plain view in the chuck box. When dinner was called the boys poured out their coffee, sweetened it and, pulling their guns out of their holsters, started stirring their coffee. Suddenly the chef had them covered and told them that while his camp outfit was not up to standard, nevertheless he had plenty of spoons.

After dinner was finished two boys matched a gun duel and one of the boys got behind K. P. and used him for a shield. The boys kept up this fighting mood for several days, and when one would address another the answer generally came back, "I'm not on speaking terms with you. If you say another word, I'll shoot you right between the eyes."

The ones that were getting the most kick out of this entertainment were two fellows called the "Pals." Little was known about the two except that they were the oldest punchers on the drive and that they hadn't visited a town during the entire drive, hadn't drawn any pay, and hadn't shaved for three months. The mysterious two were always together, hence their nickname.

From this time on K. P. was busy checking up on the fighting record of the bunch. The chuck box was badly shot up, having been used as a target the winter before. The boys would set a tomato can on it and shoot it off, to see how many times they could hit the can before it reached the ground. K. P. also noticed four notches on the wheel spoke and when he asked the cook to explain these, he was told that there was no more room on the cook's six-shooter handle and that now he

was keeping tally on the wagon spoke. If the truth were known, I put those notches there myself to show that on the three months' drive the cook had failed four times to burn his bread.

When the tenderfoot asked for an explanation of why the chuck box was shot up so badly, the cook explained that when we left San Antonio we had twenty-four men and now only ten were left. This fighting, the cook explained, was regular routine work and that the boys were rather docile now that we were nearing our destination.

K. P. then asked about the "Pals." "I'll bet they're the real stuff," he said. "But why do they wear those beards, to keep their faces from tanning?" K. P. was told that the "Pals" were just tenderfeet when they left San Antonio, and that when they got a mean horse they hired one of the boys to train him. It was explained, however, that the "Pals" were going on to the Hole in the Wall in Wyoming to start themselves a cattle ranch.

"Well," said the tenderfoot after he had heard the explanation, "I still can't help but be afraid when they're around. I surely thought I was a goner when they were shooting my Derby full of holes the other day."

We had gotten to the Republican River and were making our last stretch to Ogallala, about thirty miles I judged. That night at supper some of the boys had matched another fight and had been separated. About midnight, when the second relief guard had called the third relief, those two boys put on a sham battle and when the third relief went on, he said he was coming back and kill everyone in camp.

A few minutes later our guest had dressed, filled his cantine with water, advised the cook that he was leaving and asked for a couple of biscuits. "This fighting is getting on my nerves," he said. "I stood it all right during the daytime, but when they go to fighting at night they've got my goat. A man has to have a little sleep. Tell the conductor good by. I'll see him in town."

The next day the tenderfoot got into Ogallala and hunted up the marshal. K. P. certainly must have been a hard looker with that Derby all shot up. He told the marshal that a fighting Texas bunch would arrive within thirty-six hours and that only a small remnant of the twenty-four punchers starting with the herd was left.

The marshal advised K. P. to get over in the railroad yards and stay there, because it was not safe for him to run at large in a cowman's town. "You're liable to get the rest of that Derby shot up," the marshal said.

That was just what the tenderfoot wanted. He walked down to the depot and sent the following telegram to the Burns Detective Agency in Omaha: "Send the devil up tonight on Number 8 Stop Have him disguised like a roundhouse man stop Don't forget the Derby stop have made a contact." The message was signed "John."

THE "devil" arrived in due time and joined K. P. The morning of the second day the two of them watched from the upper-story window of their boarding house and saw the chuck wagon coming slowly up to the stock yards and pitch camp. After a while they could see the herd coming to the Platt River for water.

Just before noon K. P. and his pal dressed alike, went over in town and put on a big jag. The marshal gave them orders to leave town, and they told him they were going down to the cow camp and clean up on that fighting bunch.

As it happened, when they staggered into camp the two "Pals" were in for their dinner. These two immediately caught the idea that they could have lots of fun with the two tenderfeet and, taking the derbys away from K. P. and his companion, started throwing them in the air and shooting at them. Finally the pals had shot their six shots each and had to stop

shooting then to reload their guns.

Immediately K. P. and his friend had the two punchers covered with double-action guns and asked them to "stick 'em up and be quick about it." K. P. called for the chef to put on the handcuffs.

One of the pals said, "It's my fault you're not sleeping in an unmarked grave in the sand hills of Kansas. You remember when I was using you for a shield in that sham fight? Well, I thought I felt a star on you."

K. P. pulled his coveralls back and said, "You're right, and in the same scuffle I thought I felt a belt around your waist with money in it."

K. P. then directed the chef to search the prisoners, saying, "Each of them ought to be carrying quite a large amount of money. Proceeds from a bank they robbed at Atlanta, Georgia. These 'Pals' are Joe Underwood and John Ellis, two of the slickest bandits in the country."

ABOUT that time the marshal, hearing the firing, had raced down to the camp, I suppose to bury the tenderfeet. He rushed up to them and said, "Are you devils alive? You're my prisoners, and if you won't leave town voluntarily, I'll have to jail you."

About that time two pistols were pointed in his face and K. P. told the chef to get another pair of handcuffs, which were fastened on the marshal's wrists.

K. P. then said to the marshal, "Sam Elkins, you're wanted at Del Rio, Texas. Remember the time when you were in charge of the Mule Shoe outfit and shipped a trainload of cattle, took the proceeds and left the country?"

K. P. then turned to me and said, "You and the chef are appointed U. S. deputy marshals until these prisoners are loaded on the train."

After the train rolled in and they were making their departure, I shouted at K. P. that he was some railroader, all right. He answered me saying that I ought to save him a cow job next spring, that he wanted to make a trail hand and that he enjoyed his stay with me very much. With an *adios*, he was gone.

Trail's End Roll Call

Here, folks, are some more of the latest Trail's Enders:

Mr. Emil Anderson, R. F. D. #2, Monroe, Wash.

Miss Shirley Mae Anderson, Box 92, Trenton, Utah

Miss Helene Mae Bolton, Seabrook, N. H.

Miss Marie Brown, Box 495, Rio Vista, Calif.

Mrs. Paul E. Cleere, 7848 Ave. I, Houston, Tex.

Miss Edna Craven, Toledo, Wash.

Mr. Harry L. Crofoot, R. F. D. #3, Geneva, N. Y.

Mrs. Mary Davison, R. F. D. #5, Brown St., Jamestown, N. Y.

Miss Goldena Elkins, 1816 N. W. 39th St., Oklahoma City, Okla.

Mr. Harold Fish, 25 Factory St., Skowhegan, Me.

Mr. Elverson Freeland, Atlanta, Neb.

Miss Mary Gray, 1609 N. Central Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Miss Jane Helmer, R. F. D. #5, Box 259, Wilkinsburg, Penna.

Miss Bettie Howard, 608 Spring St., Burlington, N. C.

Mrs. Catherine J. Hussey, Box 801, Rochester, N. H.

Miss Thelma H. Kidd, R. F. D. #2, Ft. Payne, Ala.

Mr. William Kiddie, P. O. Box 455, Chico, Calif.

Miss Leona Lemelin, 54 Mill St., Augusta, Me.

Mr. Edward J. Pelky, 207 15th St., Watervliet, N. Y.

Mrs. Edith Phelps, Mogadore, Ohio

Miss Daisy K. Price, R. F. D. #1, Brown, W. Va.

Mrs. R. C. Schmidt, 49 Erskine Ave., Buffalo, N. Y.

Mr. L. O. Smith, Driggs, Idaho

Mr. Paul L. Steel, White Sulphur Springs, W. Va.

Mr. Humbert J. Tati, Box 475, Harrisville, R. I.

Mr. Luther Thomas, Box 363, Mountainair, N. M.

Miss Sarah Twitchell, Frazer, Mont.

Miss Elsie Weber, 1525 W. 51st St., Chicago, Ill.

Mr. W. A. Wiggins, Valrico, Fla.

Miss Marie Winfrey, 1316 6th Ave., No., Nashville, Tenn.

Mr. James H. Zimmers, 22 Sanford Ave., Catonsville, Md.

157

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.

I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(*Miss*)
(*Mrs.*)
(*Mr.*)

Address.....

.....

.....

Three coupons make you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
You must be a member to secure the pin.
Please *print* your name and address plainly.

Out of the Chutes

Tex Sherman

Editor's Note:

Tex Sherman, who gives us the latest news of the rodeo world, is a real Westerner. He has punched cows and broken horses throughout the West. He has been rodeo contestant and judge himself, and only last year announced the rodeo in Kansas City.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

LA FIESTA de los Vaqueros, held annually in Tucson, Arizona, will take place this year from February 21 to 24 inclusive. According to Frank Marshall, who for many years has directed the publicity there, this will be the greatest rodeos they have ever held.

Johnnie Mullens, one of the foremost arena directors, will again run the arena. They tell me that the roping cattle are plenty tough, which means that those in the steer-roping and the team tying contests are in for plenty of trouble when those hare-brained longhorns leave the chutes.

Bud Parker will again furnish the bucking horses from his own ranch. They, too, are plenty tough, having run the range since the last show. They were kept up on plenty of feed and water in spite of the drought in the Southwest last summer.

As I told you last year about the new rodeo grounds, they are as classy as you will see anywhere in the world. After the rodeo at night, there is "Wolfville" for folks' entertainment, which is a replica of the early days in Arizona, with the old-time gambling devices and the old-time saloon, where the bartender used to say "Name your pizon, gents," and then the old-timers would proceed to get loaded and shoot up the saloon. When they sobered, they usually made good the damage they done the night before.

I understand they will have chuck-wagon and stage-coach races with four half-broken broncs in harness. There are bound to be spills and runaways a-plenty, and enough thrills to last you for a life time.

Jack Kinney is still the "big gun" in the rodeo there. Without Jack on the job the outfit would not seem the same. It is through the efforts of Jack Kinney and Al Condron that *La Fiesta de los Vaqueros* is one of the foremost rodeos in the West today.

Sorry that I'm not able to be there for the big doings, but you can bet that "Out of the Chutes" will give you, in a future issue, all the happenings throughout the rodeo.

Alexander Basy, an important man

Announcing

of Russia, is trying to tie Tom Mix up with a contract. Of course, if Mix goes to Russia, he'll take his cowboys with him.

The cowboys will receive a thousand rubles a month if they go, which is a fairly big sum in our money. They will have only one day off a month, but they will have special privileges regarding food. But you can bet your bottom dollars that when they pay their tax on the money earned they will have just a trip to Russia, and that's all.

Mix is a shrewd business man, and having worked for him on several vaudeville tours, as well as when he made pictures for Fox, and F. B. O. in Hollywood, I know him. The Russian Government will find that, when they make a contract with Mix, they will have to place the money in the bank here for himself and his people, and in American coin.

Basy, who is a former manager of the Russian opera, said that he had communicated with Mix, and that the cowboy star will be available in a few weeks. However, I do not believe Mix will accept, as he now owns his own circus, and cannot afford the time to make the trip, owing to his opening early in the spring.

Mix is a favorite with the Russian children, and his horse, Tony, is just as popular.

The Soviet government is not looking for English-speaking acts, but is interested in rodeos, circuses, bands, dancers, and silent acts.

Will keep you advised regarding the outcome of the Mix trip to Russia.

Here's a hot one: A lonely Iowa girl wrote to Governor Frank H. Cooney, of Montana, asking him to find her a full-blooded Montana cowboy for a husband, and the Governor claims that he is stumped to fill her requirements. You will not find a cowboy in the West who is as perfect as she wants, and it's a sure bet that she never knew cowboys.

She wants a cowboy with black hair, black eyes, who does not drink, smoke or swear. If Governor Cooney ever finds a cowboy like that, I will arrange with Colonel W. T. Johnson, to feature him in all his rodeos.

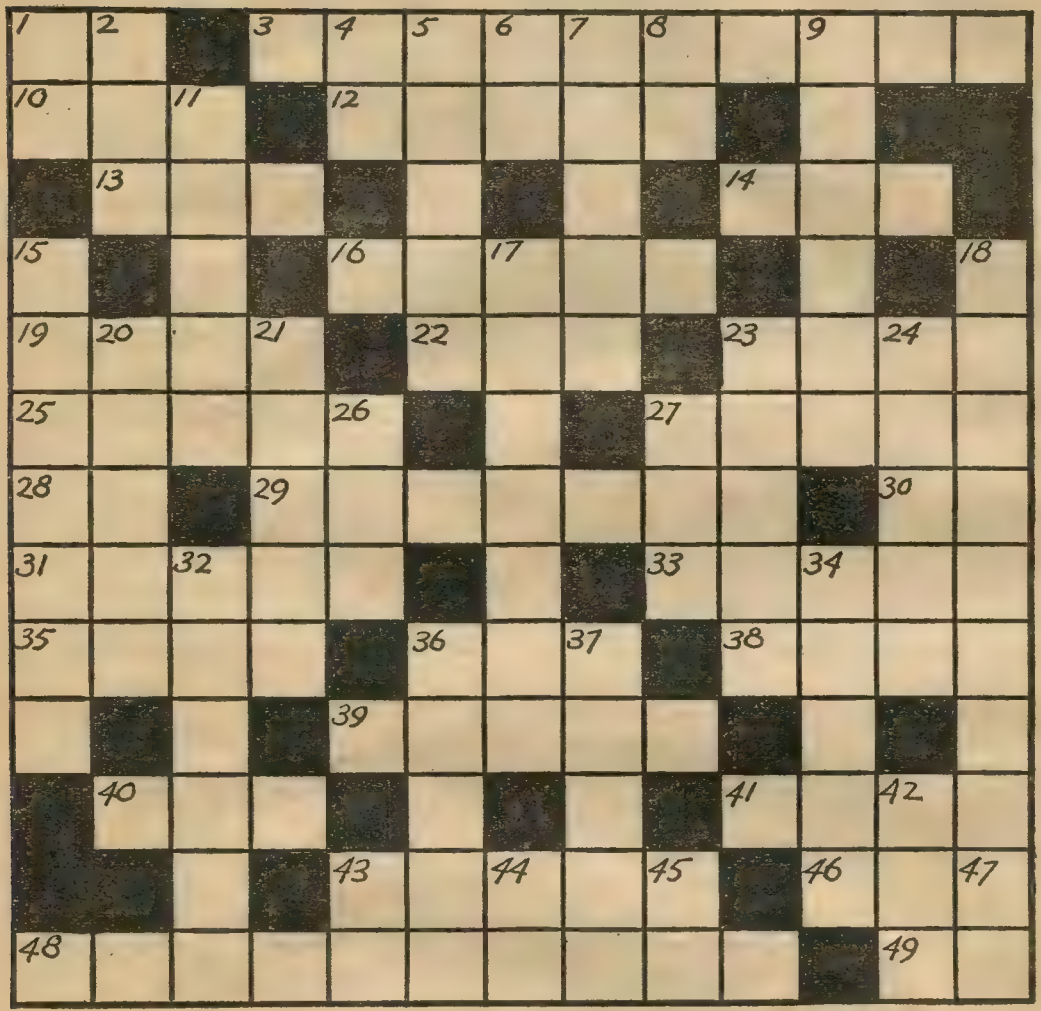
I sure hope she doesn't write to me asking me to fill her order, as I know that I would be lynched if I ever got around rodeos trying to locate a cowboy like that.

Maybe Mike Hastings, foreman for Colonel W. T. Johnson on his Birds' Nest Ranch at Spofford, Texas, might find one way back in the brush, who don't know the war is over.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

. . . . The Westerners'

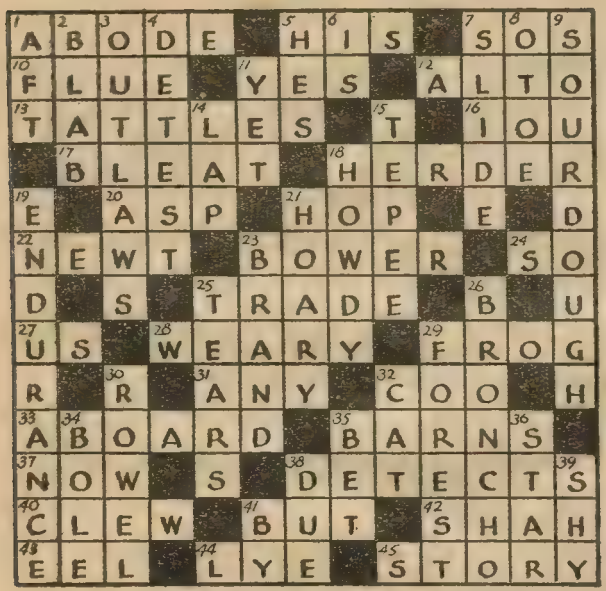


The solution to this puzzle will appear in the First April Number of Ranch Romances.

Let us know whether or not you enjoy these Western crossword puzzles. Do you like to work them out, and do you find them difficult or easy?

Remember that Ranch Romances is your magazine and that our most earnest wish is to give you what you want.

Crossword Puzzle . . .


1 A 2 B 3 O 4 D E 5 H 6 I S 7 S 8 O 9 S
10 F L U E 11 Y E S 12 A L T O
13 T A T T 14 L E S 15 T 16 I O U
17 B L E A T 18 H E R D E R
19 E 20 A S P 21 H O P E D
22 N E W T 23 B O W E R 24 S O
D S 25 T R A D E 26 B U
27 U S 28 W E A R Y 29 F R O G
R 30 R 31 A N Y 32 C O O H
33 A 34 B O A R D 35 B A R N 36 S
37 N O W S 38 D E T E C T 39 S
40 C L E W 41 B U T 42 S H A H
43 E E L 44 L Y E 45 S T O R Y

Solution to the Puzzle in the First March Number

DEFINITIONS

For the puzzle on the opposite page

Across

1. A pronoun
3. One who can throw a cow brute bare handed
10. The ocean
12. Withers; dries up
13. Hurry; bustle
14. Aged
16. The gaseous form which any solid or liquid assumes when heated
19. A Western state
22. To cut off
23. A game played on horseback
25. Repairs
27. To cheat at cards
28. A note of the scale
29. Income from taxation
30. Mother
31. Professional slang
33. A marked road or path
35. To caution
36. To bend in the middle
38. A plot of ground for building
39. The act of coming in
40. To finish
41. Gave food to
43. To overturn
46. A dull brown colored horse
48. One who searches for precious metal
49. To depart

Down

1. Exists
2. A beverage
4. A pronoun (Pl.)
5. Permitted by law
6. A note of the scale
7. To sink down from weariness
8. A bone
9. A liquid measure
11. A species of African antelope
15. Loud bursts of laughter
17. The name of an animal; also used to describe a person of bad character
18. A town in southern Arizona
20. A jewelled head dress
21. A wading bird with long neck and legs
23. Looks narrowly
24. To set bounds to or restrain
26. To cause to sit
27. The track of a wheel
32. The Mexican name for an American
34. Intended
36. A bird which frequents wet places
37. To salute or hail
42. Delved
43. Toward a higher place
44. A Southern state (Abbr.)
45. A preposition meaning toward
47. A negative

OUR AIR

"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES throughout the world. We want to help make friends for our readers. We want you to know people who are thousands of miles away, as well as people within a stone's throw of your home town.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters must reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and must contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those who actually wish correspondents. Therefore each letter must bear the signature of the writer, and anyone fraudulently signing someone's else name will be investigated.

RODEO RIDER

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for the past four years and think it great. I especially like "Out of the Chutes" by Tex Sherman.

I'd like to hear from rodeo riders, cowboys and cowgirls, in fact anyone who knows and loves horses and the great outdoors. I, myself, have lived out in the West and around horses all my life, and there is nothing I like better than to get on a good horse and hit out for the wide open spaces. I've ridden in quite a few rodeos and exhibited stock horses, among them Hoot Gibson's.

I am sixteen, five feet five inches tall, have golden-blond, wavy hair and dark blue eyes.

Come on, boys and girls and write to a lonely girl.

Sincerely,
PEGGY McMANUS.

15 Ramona Lane,
Montecito,
Santa Barbara, Calif.

CALLING STAMP COLLECTORS

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of Ranch Romances for a long time now and would like to tell you how much I enjoy it.

I am a young man, twenty-three years old, and have traveled extensively in Europe and Canada. I would be interested to hear from other readers, especially stamp collectors as stamp collecting is my favorite hobby. I would be glad to exchange stamps with them.

Yours very truly,
JIMMIE CRAWFORD.

639 Carlaw Ave.,
Toronto, Ont., Canada.

SCOTCH COOK

Dear Editor:

It seems to be such a hard job crashing the gates of "Our Air Mail," but if I can't make it this time I'll try again. I'll not be stumped by a failure.

Let's have more stories for this wonderful magazine by authors like Marie de Nevaud and William Freeman Hough. I've read Ranch Romances for two years and can find no other magazine which I enjoy as much.

As I have not traveled much I wish to hear from people who have and hope to get letters from all parts of the world. I am nineteen years old, have dark blond hair, gray-blue eyes, am five feet three inches tall and weigh one hundred and thirty-nine pounds. I like to cook, read, draw and most of all write letters. So, won't some one take a pen and some paper and write to me even if you don't say more than "Howdy"?

Well, so long folks, remember a cook awaits letters!

"SCOTCH."

Miss Eloise Snyder,
R. R. No. 5, Columbia City, Ind.

THE SPIRIT OF THE WEST

Dear Editor:

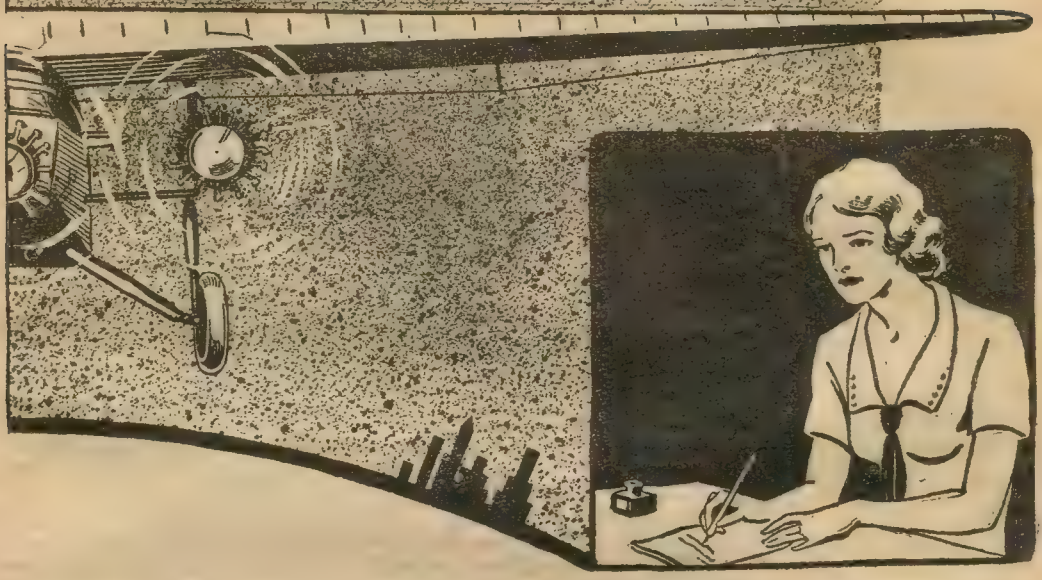
Ranch Romances keeps alive the spirit of the West within those of us who have lived there and learned to love it.

I would like to write to people who live there now and to those who think of going, for of course I plan to go back. I would be glad to correspond with those who enjoy sitting before a campfire and other outdoor pleasures.

Sincerely,
"LEW."

Lewis Leslie,
Saxonburg, Penn.

MAIL



COLORADO COWBOY

Dear Editor:

I am just a lonely cowboy and would like to join your club of pen pals. This is the first time I have written and I sure would like to see my letter printed in "Our Air Mail." Please, Editor, start the boys and girls writing this way. I live in the Northwestern part of Colorado but spend most of my time in Wyoming, so you know what kind of a life I have.

My hobbies are horseback riding, baseball, dancing, skating and climbing mountains. I promise to answer every letter that comes to me within two days after I get it. Now, I will describe myself. I am nineteen years of age, have blond hair and blue eyes. I am six feet two inches tall and weigh one hundred and fifty-four pounds. I am slender. I would be glad to trade snapshots with anyone who cares to.

Yours truly,

"BOOTS."

Leslie A. Jones,
c/o Carl Davidson,
Craig, Colo.

TEXAS RATTLESNAKE

Dear Editor:

I wish to secure correspondents from all over the world. I will send to the first five who write to me, a picture of a real Texas cowboy. I am a boy, sixteen years of age with brown eyes and black wavy hair. I am five feet four inches tall and weigh one hundred and thirty-five pounds. Hoping to hear from someone soon, I [redacted]

Sincerely yours,

"RATTLESNAKE PETE."

L. A. Long,
724 Peak St., Dallas, Texas.

CRICKLEWOOD CHATTERBOX

Dear Editor:

I have noticed that many readers from abroad have difficulty in getting their copies of Ranch Romances. I am lucky in that respect. My news-agent gets every copy although they are rather late in appearing on his racks. If your readers are really as human as the people in your excellent stories, many will blush to see this letter in print. I have sent scores of answers to pleas and have reaped a lean harvest. One reply, the first, heralded a charming pal. I am eighteen, and (I believe) energetic. Soon I shall be six feet tall. I have brown hair, gray-blue eyes, a liking for sports, an efficient camera, and a passing knowledge of affairs and places in Great Britain. I wish to trade views and chatter with the inhabitants of the world. Look me up, folks—you'll get an answer!

Impatiently,

JOHN E. ROBINSON.

94 Review Rd.,
Cricklewood,
London, N. W. 2, Eng.

A REAL RANCH GAL

Dear Editor:

Please enter my plea for mail in "Our Air Mail" department.

I am a high school graduate, living on a ranch in the mountains. We homesteaded this land and I can write real stories about this country that are similar to the tales in your magazine. I can also write about the movie studios, as I lived near them before coming up here. Two major studios made scenes at our house. I am collecting movie star photos, and I make greeting cards and write for magazines.

I would like to hear from anyone, anywhere. Magazines come and magazines go, but Ranch Romances goes on forever!

Sincerely yours,

MARJORIE HIRSCHBERGER.

Rancho Dias Felices,
R. F. D. No. 1, Box 199,
Saugus, Calif.

BUSINESS COLLEGE GIRL

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for some time and have decided to try my luck in "Our Air Mail."

I am a brunette, five feet two inches tall, have eyes of blue, weigh about one hundred and eighteen pounds, am nineteen years of age and am at present attending a Business College. I am interested in all kinds of sports, dancing, music, art, movies and stamp collecting, and will gladly exchange photos and post cards.

I room with an old-fashioned girl, aged twenty-five, who is very lonely and who would also welcome pen pals. Her name is Beatrice Poe.

Sincerely,

SYLVIA SHINELOA.

3 Bowker St.,
Greenfield, Mass.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

The Pisces Man

UNDER the sign of Pisces, the Fish, which rules from the 19th of February to the 21st of March, are born men in whom a love of peace and harmony is deeply ingrained.

Although these men shrink from self-assertion, or anything that savors of swagger and bumptiousness, they are not vacillating. Rather, they are dreamy, sensitive—almost super-sensitive—receptive to all impressions, and strangely in tune with the universe of beauty.

Often they make serious mistakes by relying on what is told them, instead of developing and holding fast to the dictums of their own good common sense. They are outspoken, at the same time rather shy, preferring quiet to controversy, clinging to their ideals, living as far as may be in their own emotional experiences, apart from the hurly-burly of the world today.

Normally good-humored, even genial, they can flare up when the occasion demands, and will fight grimly in the interests of their friends or of a cause which has enlisted their swift, generous sympathies. For themselves, they are not so quick to fight, verbally or otherwise. They seem to live for others, to want to do good to others, to make others happy.

Honor, justice, fair play, are more than mere words to them. They have a strict code; they finish what they start, even though it be distasteful, working carefully, conscientiously, and, above all, intelligently at whatever occupation may be theirs.

The Pisces man is naturally trustful. The reaction, if he finds that his trust has been betrayed, is frequently serious. He may become gloomy and morose, convinced that the world is against him. But ordinarily he is an extremely charming fellow, sincere, tender, agreeable, with a gift for story telling which makes him a most delightful companion, and an imagination that can weave threads of romance into the dullest of gray days.

In business, he should be successful in anything which has to do with ships, railroads, automobiles—the moving thing, the thing which spells change, not the mere mechanics of it. His creative ability, coupled with his wonderful response to rhythm, may lead him to excel in writing, painting, or musical composition.

He should find his mate in a girl born under the sign of Aries, Cancer, Virgo, or Scorpio; and the friends for whom he cares the most will probably also be born under these signs.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends him this coupon in care of Ranch Romances, 578 Madison Avenue, New York. Enclose stamped and self-addressed envelope.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date.....3-22-35

In the next issue Professor Mari will analyze women born between March 22nd and April 21st.

Kidneys Cause Much Trouble Says Doctor

Successful Precription Helps Remove Acids—Works in 15 Minutes

Dr. T. J. Rastelli, famous English scientist, Doctor of Medicine and Surgeon, says: "You can't feel well if your Kidneys do not function right, because your Kidneys affect your entire body."

Your blood circulates 4 times a minute through 9 million tiny, delicate tubes in your Kidneys which are endangered by drastic, irritating drugs, modern food and drinks, worry, and exposure. Beware of Kidney dysfunction if you suffer from Night Rising, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Dizziness, Circles Under Eyes, Acidity, or Loss of Pep.

Dr. W. R. George

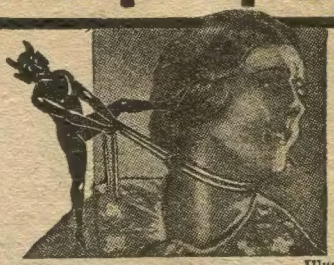
Dr. Walter R. George, for many years Health Director of Indianapolis, says: "Insufficient Kidney excretions are the cause of much needless suffering with Aching Back, Frequent Night Rising, Itching, Smarting, Burning, Painful Joints, Rheumatic Pains, Headaches, and a generally run-down body. I am of the opinion that the prescription Cystex corrects such functional conditions. It aids in flushing poisons from the urinary tract, and in freeing the blood of retained toxins. Cystex deserves the indorsement of all doctors." If you suffer from Kidney and Bladder dysfunction, delay endangers your vitality, and you should not lose a single minute in starting to take the doctor's special prescription called Cystex (pronounced Sisstex) which helps Kidney functions in a few hours. It starts work in 15 minutes. Gently tones, soothes, and cleans raw, sore membranes. Brings new energy and vitality in 48 hours. It is helping millions of sufferers and is guaranteed to fix you up and make you feel like new in 8 days, or money back on return of empty package. Get guaranteed Cystex from your druggist today.

"The finest detective stories published anywhere today are found in BLACK MASK"

Written by men who are the most brilliant living authors of detective stories—Gardner, Nebel, Coxe, Ballard and others—and who know their subjects intimately, the stories published each month in BLACK MASK magazine are the most dramatic, the most exciting, the truest to life and the most enjoyable detective stories that you can find in any magazine or book.

Get a copy today from any newsdealer, and see for yourself

ASTHMA was Stranqling her



Illustration

Attacks Stopped At Once

If asthma has kept you gasping and miserable, read this letter from Mrs. Will Case, Route No. 2, Hubbard, Nebraska.

April 19, 1931—"I was sick over 15 years with asthma. I couldn't get my breath and what little sleep I got was had while propped up in bed or in a chair. I tried Nacor. By the time I had taken half of my second bottle my asthma was gone and has not returned."—Mrs. Will Case, Route No. 2, Hubbard, Nebraska.

FREE—No need to suffer asthma torture when blessed relief can be yours. For years Nacor has helped thousands. Write for letters and booklet of helpful information about relief of asthma and bronchial coughs. Nacor Medicine Co., 460 State Life Bldg., Indianapolis, Indiana.

STOP Your Rupture Worries!

C. E. Brooks, Inventor

Why worry and suffer with that rupture any longer? Learn about my perfected invention. It has brought ease, comfort and happiness to thousands by assisting in relieving and curing many cases of reducible hernia. It has Automatic Air Cushions which **bind and draw the broken parts together as you would a broken limb.** No obnoxious springs or pads. No salves or plasters. Durable, cheap. **Sent on trial** to prove it. Beware of imitations. Never sold in stores nor by agents. Write today for full information sent free in plain, sealed envelope.

H. C. BROOKS, 174 State St., Marshall, Michigan

FOREST JOBS

easily available. $125-$200 per month. Permanent. Cabin, hunt, trap, patrol.

Get details immediately

Rayson Service Bureau, Dept. K-52, Denver, Colo.

WHISKEY HABIT HELP HIM QUIT

Send for FREE TRIAL of Noxalco, a guaranteed harmless home treatment. Can be given secretly in food or drink to anyone who drinks or craves Gin, Whiskey, Home Brew, Wine, Moonshine, etc. Your request for Free Trial brings a trial supply by return mail and full $2.00 treatment which you may try under a 30 day refund guarantee. Try Noxalco at our risk. ARLEE CO. Dept. H-12, BALTIMORE, MD.

Banish Fear
Prevent Disease
End Self Denial

KNOW THE AMAZING TRUTH ABOUT SEX AND LOVE!

Stop Worrying
Conquer Ignorance
Overcome Shame

The Forbidden Secrets of Sex are Daringly Revealed!

AWAY with false modesty! At last a famous doctor has told *all* the secrets of sex in frank, daring language. No prudish beating about the bush, no veiled hints, but TRUTH, blazing through 576 pages of straightforward facts.

Love is the most *magnificent ecstacy* in the world . . . know how to hold your loved one . . . don't glean half-truths from unreliable sources. Now you can know how to end ignorance...fear...and self denial!

MORE THAN 100 VIVID PICTURES

The 106 illustrations leave nothing to the imagination . . . know how to overcome physical mismating . . . know what to do on your wedding night to avoid the torturing results of ignorance.

Everything pertaining to sex is discussed in daring language. All the things you have wanted to know about your sex life, information about which other books only vaguely hint, is yours at last.

Some will be offended by the amazing frankness of this book and its vivid illustrations, but the world has no longer any use for prudery and false modesty.

A FAMOUS JUDGE SAYS THAT MOST DIVORCES ARE CAUSED BY SEX IGNORANCE!

Normal, sex-suited young people are torn apart because they lack sex knowledge.

WHAT EVERY MAN SHOULD KNOW

The Sexual Embrace
Secrets of the Honeymoon
Mistakes of Early Marriage
Homosexuality
Venereal Diseases
How to Regain Virility
Sexual Starvation
Glands and Sex Instinct
To Gain Greater Delight
The Truth About Abuse

WHAT EVERY WOMAN SHOULD KNOW

Joys of Perfect Mating
What to Allow a Lover to do
Intimate Feminine Hygiene
Prostitution
Birth Control Chart
How to Attract and Hold Man
Sexual Slavery of Women
Essentials of Happy Marriage
The Sex Organs

HOMOSEXUALITY...SEX ABNORMALITIES

Do you know about the astounding world of "half sexes"? They crave the companionship of their own sex...their practices are unbelievable to the normal mind...yet you should understand them.

Money back at once if you are not satisfied!

576 DARING PAGES

Don't be a *slave* to ignorance and fear. Enjoy the rapturous delights of the perfect physical love!

Lost love . . . scandal . . . divorce . . . can often be prevented by knowledge. Only the ignorant pay the *awful penalties* of wrong sex practices. Read the facts, clearly, startlingly told . . . study these illustrations and grope in darkness no longer.

You want to know . . . and you *should* know *everything* about sex. Sex is no longer a sin . . . a mystery . . . it is your greatest power for happiness. You owe it to yourself . . . to the one you love, to tear aside the curtain of hypocrisy and learn the *naked truth!*

ATTRACT THE OPPOSITE SEX!

Know *how to enjoy* the thrilling experiences that are your birthright . . . know how to attract the opposite sex . . . how to hold love.

There is no longer any need to pay the *awful price* for one moment of bliss. Read the scientific pathological facts told so bravely by Dr. Rubin. The chapters on venereal disease are alone worth the price of the book.

IS SEX IGNORANCE DRIVING THE ONE YOU LOVE INTO THE ARMS OF ANOTHER?

Let "Sex Harmony" teach you how easy it is to win and hold your loved one!

SEND NO MONEY • • • MAIL COUPON TODAY

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.

Dept. 395, 1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N.Y.

Please send me, "Sex Harmony and Eugenics" in plain wrapper. I will pay the postman $2.98 (plus postage) on delivery. If I am not completely satisfied, I can return the book and the entire purchase price will be refunded immediately. Also send me FREE OF CHARGE, your book on "Why Birth Control?"

*Name*_____ *Age*____

*Address*_____

Orders from Foreign Countries 15 Shillings in advance

THIS BOOK NOT SOLD TO MINORS

FREE! NEW BOOK "WHY BIRTH CONTROL?"

This startling book discusses birth control in an entirely new way — Tells you many things about a much discussed subject. "Why Birth Control" — will be a revelation to you — Sent free to all those who order "Sex Harmony and Eugenics" at the reduced price $2.98.

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.
Radio City
1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N.Y.

Give me your measure and I'll *PROVE* You Can Have a Body like Mine!

I'LL give you PROOF in 7 DAYS that I can turn you, too, into a man of might and muscle. Let me prove that I can put layers of smooth, supple, powerful muscles all over your body.

If you are underweight I'll add the pounds where they are needed and, if you are fat in any spots, I'll show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

And with the big muscles and powerful, evenly-developed body that my method so quickly gives you, I'll also give you through-and-through health—health that digs down into your system and banishes such things as constipation, pimples, skin blotches and the hundred-and-one other ailments that rob you of the good times and the good things of life.

NOTE: No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED make such an offer!

Charles Atlas

The 97-pound weakling who became twice holder of the title: "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"—won in open competition in the only National and International contests held during the past 15 years.

Here's All You Do!

Just jot down your name and address on the coupon below, mail it to me—and I'll send you, absolutely free, a copy of my new book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound, flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who won the title of **"The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"** against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an **"Atlas Champion"** the same easy way.

I haven't any use for weights or pulleys that may strain your heart and other vital organs. I don't dose you or doctor you. **Dynamic-Tension** is all I need. It's the natural tested method for developing real men inside and out. It distributes added pounds of powerful muscles over your body, gets rid of surplus fat, and gives you the vitality, strength and pep that win you the admiration of every woman and the respect of any man.

Charles Atlas As He Is Today.

Gamble a Stamp—To Prove I Can Make YOU a New Man!

Gamble a stamp today by mailing the coupon for a free copy of my book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It tells you all about my special **Dynamic-Tension** method, and what it has done to make big-muscled men out of run-down specimens. It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique, by my own secret methods. What my system did for me, and these hundreds of others it can do for you too. Don't keep on being only one-half of the man you can be! Find out what I can do for you.

Where shall I send your copy of **"Everlasting Health and Strength"?** Write your name and address plainly on the coupon and mail it today. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 93, 115 East 23rd Street, New York City.

CHARLES ATLAS, **Dept. 93**
115 East 23rd Street, New York City.

I want the proof that your system of **Dynamic-Tension** will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."**

Name. ....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address. .. ..

City. .. .. State.....

© 1935 C. A. Ltd.

She Got $400.00 for a Half Dollar

I will pay CASH for OLD COINS, BILLS and STAMPS

Mrs. Sam Dowty of San Angelo, Texas, sold B. Max Mehl one-half dollar for $400.00.

I PAID $200.00

To J. D. Martin, of Virginia, for Just One Copper Cent

"Please accept my thanks for your check for $200.00 in payment for the copper cent I sent you. I appreciate the interest you have given this transaction. It's a pleasure to do business with a firm that handles matters as you do. I wish to assure you it will be a pleasure to me to tell all my friends of your wonderful offer for old coins." Julian D. Martin, Va.

This is but one of the many similar letters we are constantly receiving. Post yourself! It pays! We paid Mr. Manning, New York, $2,500.00 for a single silver dollar. Mrs. G. F. Adams, Ohio, received $740.00 for some old coins. We paid W F. Wilharm, of Pennsylvania, $13,500.00 for his rare coins. I paid J. T. Neville, of North Dakota, $200.00 for a $10 bill he picked up in circulation. Mr. Mehl paid $1,000.00 to Mr. Brownlee, of Ga., for one old coin. Mr. Brownlee, in his letter to Mr. Mehl, says: *"Your letter received with the check for $1,000.00 enclosed. I like to deal with such men as you and hope you continue buying coins for a long time."* In the last thirty years we have paid hundreds of others handsome premiums for old bills and coins.

All Kinds of Old Coins, Medals, Bills and Stamps Wanted

$1.00 to $1,000 paid for certain old cents, nickels, dimes, quarters, etc. Right now we will pay $50.00 for 1913 Liberty Head nickels (not buffalo), $100.00 for 1894 dimes ("S" Mint), $8.00 for 1853 quarters (no arrows), $10.00 for 1866 quarters (no motto), $200.00 each for 1884 and 1885 Silver Trade Dollars, etc., etc.

Big Cash Premiums for Hundreds of Coins Now Circulating

There are literally thousands of old coins and bills that we want at once and for which we will pay big cash premiums. Many of these coins are now passing from hand to hand in circulation. Today or tomorrow a valuable coin may come into your possession. Watch your change. Know what to look for.

Amazing Profits FOR THOSE WHO KNOW OLD MONEY!

There are single pennies that sell for $100.00. There are nickels worth many dollars—dimes, quarters, half dollars and dollars on which big cash premiums are paid. Each year a fortune is offered by collectors for rare coins and stamps for their collections. The prices paid are amazing.

It Pays to Post Yourself on the Big Values of Old Coins and Stamps

Knowing about coins pays. Andrew Henry, of Idaho, was paid $900.00 for a half-dollar, received in change. A valuable old coin may come into your possession or you may have one now and not know it. Post yourself.

Huge Premiums for Old Stamps

Some old stamps bring big premiums. An old 10c stamp, found in an old basket, was recently sold for $10,000.00. There may be valuable stamps on some of your old letters. It will pay you to know how to recognize them.

Let Me Send You My Big Illustrated Coin Folder! It Will Open Your Eyes! Use the Coupon Below!

Send the coupon below and 4 cents for my Large Illustrated Coin and Stamp Folder and further particulars. **Write today** for this eye-opening valuable wealth of information on the profits that have been made from old money. No obligation on your part. You have nothing to lose—everything to gain. It may mean much profit to you.

FILL OUT AND MAIL NOW!

TO B. MAX MEHL
105 Mehl Building, Fort Worth, Texas.

Dear Mr. Mehl: Please send me your Large Illustrated Coin and Stamp Folder and further particulars, for which I enclose 4 cents.

Name.

Address.....

City ... .. State.

B. MAX MEHL *Director Numismatic Co. of Texas.*
105 Mehl Building · **FORT WORTH, TEXAS.**